ATTITUDES OF MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS AT THE FACULTIES OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB

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Introduction

The results of the research were published in: Women’s/Gender Studies – Integration within the Croatian University System (Study, April 2002); by Valerija Barada, Juliette Janušić, Biljana Kašić and Jasmina Pešut.

Within the framework of the research project, Women’s/Gender Studies – Integration within the Croatian University System, we have attempted to investigate the attitudes and knowledge of the student population at Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb regarding Women’s Studies and gender equality at the University. More precisely, we were interested in finding out how they perceived the importance of Women’s/Gender Studies and how well they were informed about them. We believed that the findings from this population would be crucial particularly keeping in mind the central role students would play in any future reform of the university educational system. In many documents referring to the reform, and also in statements and comments made by the professional university public, the need for stronger participation of students in the process of education, respectively their becoming a subject in the entire process, is highlighted. Through an open concept we attempted to investigate what, and how much knowledge the students had about Women’s Studies. We allowed the interviewees to outline their attitudes towards the research topic themselves. Certainly, we found the necessary guidelines for the investigation in the complete Study and the data we learned through it. The basic connection between the Study and the survey was the question on gender equality in the process of establishing and opening Women’s Studies at various universities in the world. These terms were also related to each other in the National Politics for Gender Mainstreaming, which stipulates that the opening of Women’s Studies at the university is a way of achieving equality.

During October 2001 we surveyed 125 female and male students in senior semesters (third and fourth year students and senior undergraduates) from the Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Law, Croatian Studies, Faculty of Economy, Faculty of Political Sciences and Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation. We chose these students because Women’s/Gender Studies was initially created in such scholarly surroundings and because we saw their integration within the university precisely within these faculties, i.e. their departments and chairs. The sample was random, both with regard to the number of interviewees proportional to the absolute number of students at each faculty as well as to distribution according to sex. The data on the surveyed population was acquired from the release by the State Institute for Statistics of the Republic of Croatia entitled, “Students in the Winter Semester 2000/2001”.

The data was collected through a fieldwork survey (“face to face” survey), which was conducted by two trained female interviewers. They made additional notes during the survey, which were later used in the qualitative follow-up.

After inputting the data, we continued with the analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis were used. While conducting the survey, we encountered a certain level of lack of information and a slight reluctance in naming a personal gender identity. However, we were delighted by the expressed interest and openness on the part of students towards new issues and content, which encouraged us in conducting the entire study.

Among a series of interpretations obtained from the data, the following framework emerged as the most evident one: the student population is mainly not acquainted with the particularity of the scholarly comprehension of Women’s Studies, but does recognize the need to deal with the topic of equality within faculty programs. Along with the negative estimation regarding the opening of such
studies in Croatia in the near future, we also noticed some democratic space for their acceptance. We shall attempt to prove this affirmative perception in three rounds of interpretation, following the obtained results and respecting the mentioned framework.

**On equality**

When asked whether and in what faculty programs they encountered the issue of promoting gender equality, 52,8% of the interviewees answered affirmatively, and 47,2% answered in negatively. Most frequently they encountered this issue in the media (television programs 84,8%, magazines 80%, radio program 59,2%) or in publications by groups dealing with the promotion of women’s rights (56,8%). It is understandable that the issue is most present in the media, who record different promotional campaigns or scandals.1

The result whereby half of the interviewees said they encountered the issue at the faculty might be encouraging especially when connected with the fact that 45,6% of the interviewees were able to name a more concrete theme, context, female author or theory dealing with women. A conclusion might be drawn that students who are interested in subjects of equality pay more attention to it also at their faculties. However, at the Faculty of Law all mentioned content is related to the course on Family Law, where a few interviewees additionally mentioned that only women lecture there. At the Faculty of Philosophy 53,12% of the interviewees named themes related to literature, that is, with female characters in literature.

It is necessary to single out the Faculty of Economics, where 22,58% mentioned faculty themes, while 77,42% said that such themes or themes from that point of view had not been dealt with. Among the answers that were related to the faculty program, the following answer by one female student was highlighted by the interviewer: "But I remember jokes at the expense of women: women were made for the kitchen; it was best when they had no right to vote." (4th year) The question which asked whether the issue of equality should be discussed at faculties, 67,74% of the students of economics answered in the affirmative. A total of 80% of those surveyed believe that gender equality should be discussed and promoted at faculties, while 20% think the opposite. The reasoning for the YES answers is related to the legal and “everyday” meaning of equality and the importance of being aware and of the shifting away from a stereotypical understanding of the genders (sexes). The reasoning for the NO answers is that it is no longer necessary to discuss this problem since it is no longer evident or is not a part of the prevailing academic discourse, which may be ascribed to the classic scholarly approach at the Zagreb University.

Let us summarize by saying that the female and male students encountered the issue of equality at their faculties too. However, the quality and content of these themes was mostly related to traditional women’s themes (the role of women in family law, aspects of violence against women, female characters in literature) and do not bring in any of the characteristics of Women’s Studies research. The interviewees think that it is necessary to discuss and promote equality at faculties and also that it is necessary to start Women’s Studies programs at the university, which we shall present in the next round of interpretation.

**On Women’s Studies**

The second round of interpretations elaborates the knowledge and attitudes of students of Women’s Studies. We asked them if they had heard of Women’s/Gender Studies and if they could say something about them, i.e. define them. We wanted to know if they would like to learn more about them and if they would find it necessary to introduce them in Croatian universities. The final question referred to their assessment of such a probability.

The interviewed population was not informed about the domain of the notion of Women’s Studies, but a democratic space open to the possibility of such studies does exist. When asked whether they had heard about Women’s Studies, 45,6% of the students gave answers in the affirmative and 54,4% in the

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1 At the time, there was an actual scandal that had taken place in the Croatian Parliament when an MP, dr. A. Kovačević, told MP prof. dr. Vesna Pusić that she had been ‘born for the mattress and not for philosophy’ [translator’s note: this was a play on words that cannot be properly translated into English]. Several interviewees mentioned this as a negative example. Some interviewees used this comment for the answer and some for an additional explanation, which the interviewers noted in their protocols. We used this data in our analysis as well.
negative. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the percentage of the affirmative answers was not comforting, since 73.68% could neither precisely say what Women’s Studies was about, nor define it, nor say something about it in more detail.¹ The remaining 26.32% knew about the studies or knew some students attending them. Thus, although the result of 45.6% is promising, it does not bring with it the quality of knowing about the contents of the studies.

Chart 1. Answers to the question: Have you heard about Women’s/Gender Studies?

Our next question aimed at finding out whether the interviewees knew something more about Women’s Studies. We wanted to hear whether there was interest and motivation for women’s and similar issues, that is, whether it arose from a scholarly-educational discourse or from pure curiosity. The ambition of this question in the direction of scholarly cognition was deliberate: did students connect or were they able to connect Women’s Studies with contemporary scholarly-theoretical developments? The results show that 75.2% of them want to learn more about Women’s/Gender Studies, while 24.8% are not interested in such content. The argumentation of the replies was simple, since curiosity was mentioned as one of the main reasons for the interest (65.96% of the YES answers). For the remaining percentage of the YES answering interviewees, i.e. in 34.04% of the answers, the reason for wanting to learn more about Women’s/Gender Studies was their interest in women’s issues. The argumentation behind the NO answer was either lack of spare time due to obligations at the faculty, or indifference or unawareness of such issues.

Let us highlight the argument interest in women’s issues, chosen proportionally to the same extent by both female and male interviewees; precisely, 24.44% of the total number of female interviewees, and 28.57% of the total number of male interviewees. One might expect that more women would mention this argument, but the total argumentation as well as the interviewers’ protocols show that it is only the female interviewees who avoid mentioning their gender identity. Even though some of the female students express their identity as a woman as the reason for their interest in this topic, the argumentation among both female and male interviewees is on the whole the same:

Female interviewees:
- *I think it would help the affirmation of women in today’s world, in particular, in our society.* (4th year)
- *I have never had an opportunity to think about it or to give my opinion on it.* (3rd year)
- *... that it helps to improve the awareness that women can do everything and to change this stereotypic system.* (3rd year)

Male interviewees:

¹ Some interviewees perceived Women’s Studies as a spatial segregation of women at exclusively “women’s” faculties, which brings very negative connotations with it. While creating the questionnaire and conducting the actual survey, we decided to use the term Women’s/Gender Studies, thinking the subject of gender studies might be more recognizable. However, the interviewers mentioned that some interviewees did not recognize the term gender nor make distinction between gender and sex; in one answer gender was related to a blood relationship. These examples show the ignorance and/or lack of information among the students’ population.
- I wish to learn what the real situation of things is like. (senior undergraduate)
- I am interested because it is socially relevant. (senior undergraduate)
- Most of the students are women, and the curriculum is written by men, most of the professors are men; things should be looked upon from the female perspective. (4th year)

Therefore, most students wished to learn more about Women's/Gender Studies, although they did not recognize its scholarly particularity. This is certainly understandable, since in general they know little about this topic and about the gender perspective of (in) science. The differences by sex in the answers were not evident because both female and male interviewees argue their interest in Women's Studies or issues in a similar way. There is no identification with a specific difference in the position of women, but there is an awareness of such a position. The interviewees take notice of women’s issues and their position in society, but do not place it in their own identification-scholarly discourse. The interest for Women’s/Gender Studies opens a space for their introduction into the university, which the following results confirm.

The following result is also interesting. To the question whether students find it necessary to introduce Women’s/Gender Studies into the university 68% of them answered the question in the affirmative and 32% in the negative. Arguments for these answers arise from a worldview context. From its openness, the interviewees evaluate this context as being more complex. Their YES answers rely on the observation of different aspects of equality, particularly through accepting the right of those who are interested by this theme to choose. Such a democratic view encompasses the following answers, where the students believe it is necessary to introduce Women’s/Gender Studies into the university because of new knowledge and perspectives and in order to enrich the university curriculum. The students also recognize world trends and think that Croatian universities should follow those that could be useful for us as well, especially when it comes to the position of women in Croatian society and at the university. Certainly, they think such a position should be changed also through initiating Women’s/Gender Studies at the university.

Chart 3. Argumentation for YES answers to the question: Do you find it necessary to introduce Women’s/Gender Studies into the university?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YES, it is necessary to introduce Women’s/Gender Studies, because of…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position of women in society and on university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New knowledge, approaches and perspectives; wider academic selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of world trends for those interested in attending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different aspects of equality; recognising the right to choose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those answering negatively consider the subject of equality irrelevant since we are equal and such studies would represent an unnecessary division. In addition to the unfamiliarity of this problem and the aforementioned discomfort with gender identification, as an explanation of their attitudes, the interviewees mentioned the ambiguity of the purposes of Women’s/Gender Studies within the existing scholarly discourse. They believed that the content of these studies do not belong to the field of science (research). This is the argumentation of 20% of the total NO answers. The remaining interviewees said they are either not interested or not informed about the topic and therefore cannot give an objective assessment of the need to introduce such studies.

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3 Response of interviewee: “This sounds strange to me. Because it comes to the division between sexes and why it came to this, as science does not differentiate the sexes.” (5th semester)
As was already mentioned, 68% of the interviewees find it necessary to introduce Women’s/Gender Studies into the university, but a great majority of them do not believe Women’s/Gender Studies will indeed be introduced into Croatian universities. This was the finding based on answers to the question: Do you believe that Women’s/Gender Studies will be introduced into the Croatian universities? Namely, 67.2% of the interviewees think that will not happen, while 32.8% think it will. The discrepancy between the assessment of the need and the assessment of the probability of introducing Women’s/Gender Studies becomes clear if the reasoning for such answers is considered. The explanations offered by the interviewees for their affirmative answers comprise the assessment that due to the political context in Croatia, the introduction of Women’s/Gender Studies into university curricula will take a certain amount of time. They also think that it is a world trend that we shall come to follow eventually, due to women’s persistence or their interest in the topic. As for the explanations for negative answers, the prevailing attitude is that the studies will not be introduced mostly because of the political context, and because of men’s resistance or the lack of interest. The remaining interviewees either could not assess why the studies would not be introduced or thought it would not happen in the near future.

It is interesting that the interviewees used similar types of argumentation while assessing the probability in the affirmative and assessing it in the negative. Both take into consideration the political context and the indifference or the interest of potential students. The mentioned attitudes are based on their optimistic or pessimistic impression of Croatia and the current political reality, as well as their view of life based on which they additionally assess whether there will be enough interest for the studies. Of course, the latter assessment rests upon their perception of the importance of the topic we were investigating. Let us repeat here that the majority of the 67.2% does not believe the studies will be introduced into the Croatian universities. Their assessments are even more understandable if we point out the difference between this description of the situation and their assessments of the need for the introduction of Women’s/Gender Studies into the university. The students are dissatisfied with the general Croatian situation.

At the end we can confirm the conclusions shown from the obtained data: about one half of the interviewees from the Zagreb Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences have heard about Women’s/Gender Studies but can neither define them nor place them within a scholarly framework. They wish to learn more about the topic out of curiosity, but do not want to identify themselves as genders and out of that position demonstrate interest for the investigated topic. The interest for Women’s/Gender Studies is evident also in the attitude that the studies should be introduced into the university, but the assessment of the probability for that is negative. Namely, the interviewees think the studies will not be introduced into the university in the near future mainly because of the Croatian political context and the worldview.

On the qualitative contribution of Women’s Studies

The openness for Women’s/Gender Studies is not only manifested on the level of initial curiosity for their content, but moves a step forward toward their qualitative contribution to the process of studying in Croatia. Indirectly related to this contribution is the interest for the innovation of academic methods and for updating scientific (scholarly) approaches.

When asked whether they think Women’s Studies would improve and enrich the Croatian university system, 88% of the interviewees answered in the affirmative, while 12% did not think the studies would make any new contribution. The reasons for the possible enrichment of the university system were found in new perceptions and content, in the raising of awareness and promotion of new values that would enable a change in the worldview. The choice offered by such studies would give an additional opportunity for those who are interested in Women’s/Gender Studies in particular. In the plurality of approaches and choices the students confirmed the tolerance and openness to a new and up to now absent gender perspective at the Zagreb University. Their affirmative stand about the contribution of Women’s/Gender Studies is explained in the following way:

- They would modernize and update the program of higher education. (3rd year)
A new approach to the problem; women’s issues would enter the stage where real problems are discussed in society. (3rd year)

If there is a need for them, introducing Women's/Gender Studies would mean enrichment. Discussion is enrichment. (3rd year)

I would open that for men as well! I would see the other side, everything would be obligatory. (4th year)

New content is never too much, especially if the studies break with dogmas and stereotypes. I think much can be learnt from that. (4th year)

From my experience I believe they will bring in new topics that have not been present at the university. They probably will, as they deal with something very reasonable. (senior undergraduate)

They are more educational. For a young girl, who was brought up in a different way, to realize that she has equal chances in society. (3rd year)

In the 12% of the answers illustrating the negative opinion towards the enrichment of the university system, the students mainly expressed their doubts that such studies would contribute to the academic education and the academic system, since they insist on inputting the difference. Gender identification and a gender approach are repeatedly marked in a negative way and not accepted:

- I don’t know what Women’s Studies might deal with; why they can’t be mixed? This would mean the narrowing of issues. (3rd year)

- They would not improve discussions about women, it is not possible to improve the system with such themes. (4th year)

- Absolutely no. It would be counter-productive, it would not mean an improvement. When there is competition between men and women, the quality is better. If the women were alone, the quality would decline. In this way we make them learn more. (4th year)

However, the great majority of the interviewees approves of the change and the quality of the content that Women’s/Gender Studies would contribute to the Croatian university system. Besides, we believe they would also accept the innovative methods and scholarly approaches, which are characteristic of Women’s/Gender Studies, because they would want these characteristics be spread over the whole system. Namely, we tried to evaluate the presence of certain characteristics of studying at Croatian universities, and personal wishes and perceptions of our interviewees regarding the future representation of the same. The characteristics were the following: interdisciplinarity, stimulation of creativity and creation of a personal critical attitude, connecting theoretical knowledge with experience, studies as a space for stimulating social changes, exchange of contemporary scholarly achievements and support of gender stereotypes in educational contents and the equalization between academic knowledge and men’s knowledge. Certainly, Women’s/Gender Studies have influenced the last two characteristics in terms of a positive change and semantic shift. The results achieved on Likert’s scale, prove again the reality and criticism of the evaluation process, along with their obvious wish with regards to a future (reformed) University. Let us compare the results obtained on Likert’s scale:

Chart 5. The average values obtained on the Likert’s scale: assessment of the presence of the certain characteristics as opposed to personal wishes regarding their future presence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC / VARIABLE</th>
<th>EVALUATION OF THE PRESENCE</th>
<th>PERSONAL WISH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinarity</td>
<td>2,77</td>
<td>4,02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stimulating creativity and creation of personal critical attitude</td>
<td>2,6</td>
<td>4,78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping gender stereotypes in educational contents</td>
<td>2,22</td>
<td>1,54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equation between academic knowledge and men’s knowledge</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>1,26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting theoretical knowledge with experience</td>
<td>2,11</td>
<td>4,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies as a space for stimulating social changes</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>4.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange of contemporary scientific achievements</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that the interviewees do not think all these variables are characteristic of studying in Croatia, or that they are very rarely represented. This means that to the extent they can judge, they notice neither the interdisciplinary nature of the studies, nor the stimulation for creativeness and creation of a personal critical opinion. Our studies are not stimulating spaces for social changes, just like they are not spaces for exchanging contemporary scholarly achievements. The least represented is the process of connecting theoretical knowledge with experience. An evaluation, which is encouraging refers to the rare upholding of gender stereotypes and equalization of academic and men’s knowledge. The results which are related to the desire for representation of the described specifics show that all except the last two are desirable. The most desirable one is the stimulation of creativity and creation of a personal critical opinion, whose average value is 4.78.

Let us highlight the variables interdisciplinarity and connecting theoretical knowledge with experience since these best outline the particularities of Women’s/Gender Studies, but also their innovatory work methods.

Chart 6. Interdisciplinarity: Appraisal of the situation and wishes

![Interdisciplinarity Chart](chart.png)

It is evident from the table that in the appraisal of the current situation 51.2% of the interviewees chose the values 1 and 2. Hence, they estimate that interdisciplinarity is either not present or is rare as a characteristic of studying in Croatia. On the other hand, 26.4% interviewees chose the value 4, where they estimate that interdisciplinarity is however present. Most critical were the students of the Faculty of Philosophy, whose appraisal is that interdisciplinarity is not present at their Faculty. A slightly better appraisal of their Faculty was given by students of law and economics, followed by students at the Faculty of Political Sciences and the Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation. 41.6% of the students at Croatian Studies say interdisciplinarity is present at their Faculty.

All students agreed on one thing: they would like that interdisciplinarity be more present! The table shows that 84% of the interviewees chose the values 4 and 5. They expressed the desire to have this characteristic completely represented. We could not notice differences in these answers at the faculties surveyed.

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4 In the interviewers’ notes accompanying this variable, they wrote that the interviewees did not notice the presence of this characteristic, since they think that knowledge is ONE thing and not a privilege of a certain gender. According to them, knowledge is neither male nor female, and it cannot be equalized with academic knowledge. Feminist theories and analysis in the framework of Women’s/Gender Studies have shown that precisely the argumentation against equalizing male knowledge with the universal one and the unveiling of gender stereotypes is a fundamental place for criticisms of current systems of knowledge. We notice the ignorance regarding the gender profile of sciences, which might be related to the already mentioned reluctance towards gender identification. The conclusion is enforced by statements expressed on the second Likert’s scale, measuring their wishes for the representation of knowledge as unique.
A percentage of 76.8% of the interviewees estimate that this is not a characteristic of their faculties and chose answers 1 and 2, which signify that this characteristic is either not at all or very rarely present. However, 98.4% of them would like their faculties to start paying more attention to this aspect of studying. They mention the importance of this characteristic for the quality of studying and learning, as well as the cruciality of the contacts between theory and experience for their future professions.

With this interpretation we attempted to determine more precisely the interest of the student population for the introduction of Women’s/Gender Studies into the university. The view that these studies with their content would enrich and improve the university system is shifted onto the domain of their specific methods. We do not claim that they are additionally interested in Women’s/Gender Studies because of their educational methods, since that was not a subject of the evaluation. Indirectly, we conclude that the students perceive the need for such a practice that yet specifically determines Women’s/Gender Studies. It is therefore our opinion that Women’s/Gender Studies would contribute to the university system through their content and their scholarly methods and approaches.

Conclusion

The interviewees have different opinions and ideas around the introduction of Women’s/Gender Studies into the university. The proposals range from organizing regular discussions at faculties, introducing elective or obligatory courses, opening new professorships, departments or university centres, to the idea that it is necessary to change the existing structure through the education of professors. Although they are not altogether familiar with the topics of Women’s/Gender Studies, they would welcome their introduction into the university, mainly because the problem of equality is present and it should be discussed academically. The curiosity about the content is supplemented by the desire for the characteristics marking women’s/gender to become a part of the whole university system. The argument for the attitude on not introducing Women’s/Gender Studies into the university system rests upon the estimation of the Croatian political context and the traditional view of life, owing to which the interviewees think there will be no introduction of Women’s/Gender Studies.

Although the real estimation by the interviewees is not favorable, the interest and curiosity for Women’s/Gender Studies is encouraging. The survey has helped us to uncover a part of our university reality. In the context of the study Women’s/Gender Studies – Integration within the University System, and in the view of the future reform of the University of Zagreb, we can draw the conclusion that these studies can offer a full range of new content and methods and we hope that they will soon be in a position to contribute to the quality of the Croatian academic system.

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