

## **A Reflection on Summer School on the Topic “Women in Europe: an Unfinished Revolution?”**

EUROPAEUM, 29<sup>th</sup> June – 4<sup>th</sup> July 2014, Universidad Complutense, Madrid

This short essay is a reflection on one particular student summer school focused on gender topics. The target is not to evaluate summer schools on gender topics in general or to give an objective perspective to this specific summer school but to describe and reconsider the way of presenting the gender phenomenon at this specific school from an anthropology student’s point of view.

The summer school titled “Women in Europe: an Unfinished Revolution?” took place at Universidad Complutense in Madrid from June 29 to July 4, 2014. The participants were mostly M.A. and Ph.D. students in the role of discussants and experts from law and justice, think tanks, politics, NGOs and universities presenting various gender issues. The panels and working groups were supposed to debate questions of gender policies, prostitution, gender and religion, gender equality, gender violence, same-sex marriages, schools and gender and many more. The main program was drafted as lectures of professionals followed by questions and discussions of students. M.A. and Ph.D. students also had an opportunity to present their projects, research or thesis and therefore to get feedback from scholars, NGO representatives, prosecutors and other students. The topics were not viewed primarily from the anthropological

perspective but were interdisciplinary. Besides the scientific approach the topics were discussed from the points of view of media, politics, religion, an activist approach and mainly from the perspective of feminism.

From to the title “*Gender* summer school” I expected an equal gender approach to the latest gender issues. The key words in the title “Unfinished Revolution” naturally bring up many expectations and biases, so my question was whether to expect a scientific analysis of gender relations transformation or activist perception of women gaining power at the beginning of the century. One of the first discussion topics was called “All Women, Not all Men?” which tends to anticipate equal inclusion of both genders to the debate on the divisions of social roles. Most of the lecturers were women who focused their attention primarily on women’s issues describing the topics exclusively as the problems which bring inequality between genders to the detriment of women. Every topic was presented with the prejudice of oppressed woman in most of the presented fields. Women’s rights in the perspective of public policy were described as primarily uneven through the evaluation of the number of mentions of the word “woman” in law books. The panel about women’s identity and heritage was composed of topics that did not fit into other panels like women and mass media, poetry, lesbians and women migrant house workers. The panel on women in education and society presented statistics of female professors in schools and some examples of female literature authors focused on lesbian poetry and prose. Summarizing the content of

the panels question “All Women, Not all Men?” seems unanswered to me.

First, I miss the issue of men in discussing gender roles and relationships. Furthermore I also miss objectivity in presenting “oppressed” women, which is the fact that only strengthened the invisible role of man in the debate topics. To support the conclusions of the roles of women in Western society the lecturers often used statistics. Those were mainly figures of women working in various sectors, their participation in politics, numbers of women scholars, numbers of women artists presented in art galleries, etc. But the statistics were carefully selected concerning mainly the sectors where the women seemed to be disadvantaged from some point of view. Very often I missed the interpretation of the whole context that would contain other related factors of described social reality. For instance the women presenting their pieces of art in galleries were analyzed as “unrepresented” and later even “ignored” based on the statistics of a few museums obviously not well known. The historical context of the cultural era in which the various artists were active was omitted.

Another interesting issue concerned the LGBT community and their rights. Surprisingly, almost exclusively, only lesbians were discussed in terms of adoption, same-sex marriage, lesbian poetry and lesbian literature authors. Again, where are the men in this gender topic? The next topic was naturally the earnings of women and men. These were compared in a table, but without regard to the type of occupation. Maternity leaves were also presented as disadvantageous for working women but nothing was said about men’s paternity

leave and its practices in European countries. One of the most interesting and important topics for me was domestic workers. A movie about Philippine women migrants working in Chinese households in Hong Kong was screened. But because of the lack of time only parts of the movie were presented, so the most serious issues of this phenomenon were skipped. Not much time was assigned for the topic of remittances, care chains, transgenerational and gender relationships and roles that are being transformed after women’s migration.

The summer school was not drafted as exclusively anthropological; the topics were presented from the perspective of more scientific disciplines and there were not only scientific points of view presented but also other non-scientific fields. Therefore I am not in a position to evaluate the program only from the anthropological perspective. But still it is interesting to consider what attitude anthropology as a scientific discipline would hold in those issues compared with the feministic and activist position of this summer school. The lack of social context in the statistics and gender relations including men has already been mentioned. There were more obvious issues where anthropology would emphasize cultural relativism rather than activism. One example is the question of female circumcision in some regions of Africa. There was a movie screened on the topic of female genital mutilation in a few tribes in Kenya, Ethiopia, Congo and Egypt. Afterwards a discussion was held which led to the consent of almost all the participants that this is an unforgivable act that should be stopped immediately. Their main argument was that most of

the male actors in the documentary were also against the act of genital mutilation. The fact that the perspective of the camera can be very selective and the informants who performed the mutilation in the movie were mainly from the educated social class did not play any role for the discussants of the summer school. The perspective of cultural relativism was completely left out and the gender roles and the gender system of Western society (there is the question if there is any common system) was applied to the system of different cultures in an effort to stop female mutilation. The argument that female mutilation is only one pattern in a whole complex of social and cultural practices so to stop only the act of mutilation would strongly disrupt the social system was unacceptable. Other phenomena concerning equal rights, gender roles or gender identity also

lacked the emic perspective and immersion in the social problem. The solution was always the activist attitude held by Western female academics.

On the other hand this summer school was a great opportunity for M.A. and Ph.D. students to present their projects concerning gender topics. There was a ground for discussions and feedback on their research or final thesis. About thirty students attended but only two presentations were anthropological. One of them was on the topic of transgenerational relationships between two generations of Vietnamese women in the Czech Republic and the second one was on female songs about relationships in the northern part of Afghanistan. Neither of the presentations held any activist perspective; both tended to the “objective,” non-judgmental interpretation of social reality.

*Tereza Vrbková*