

„PERSPECTIVE OF THE SUBORDINATE SUBJECT” – PUBLIC LIFE AND SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSES OF FEMALE EXISTENCE¹”

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Abstract

Demand for „visibility” of women and female interests in public and scientific discourse have been formulated and incorporated into postmodern perception through a long and conflict-bearing period. This study reveals phenomena and experiences by means of which female perception have been gradually outcropped and integrated into glossaries, language, socially determined patterns, as well as into public policy and sciences. As result, studies and overall mentality about gender issues no more symbolize specific cases of otherness but legitimate equal status of man and women in all social spheres.

Keywords: *women’s history, women’s studies, gender-focused research*

1. Even history forgot about writing the story of women²?

Do women have a history? The question, symbolizing our issue originally appeared as the title of a volume edited by Scott, 2001. In general, historical perspective of women appears in terms of describing problematic distinctions between men and women, or women and women. Deep historical and cultural differences of female existence also render impossible for historiography to consider them as a homogeneous group; nevertheless differences themselves also have a history, worth for profound analysis: they occur in a given environment and “(...) differences usually result in hierarchic relationships, creating opportunity for not to acknowledge complexity, contradiction and internal inequalities. The question to what extent and in what ways (through multiple references and metaphoric associations) differences work can only be answered in single examples” (Scott, 2001:9). In this perspective, historical analysis of women does not focus on suppression or heroism, but on exploration of how gender differences have been formerly used for legitimating diverse social and political organizations, and for interpreting or rejecting social norms. Following Scott, relevant researches shall not address abolishing distinctions; analysis shall aim at recognizing and understanding differences, thus providing excellent theoretical basis for interpreting contemporary inequalities and initiating related dialogue. Researchers aiming at ameliorating women’s circumstances have been exploring the past for centuries to find exemplary persons: women scientists, writers, artists, politicians, etc. They collected stories disproving prejudices about women’s incapability, declared in contemporary literature or

1 Discourse is seen as a socially embedded and conditioned, paradigm – driven utterance

2 Title is deriving from the volume of Lajos Kiss (1995) *Life of the Poor. Művelt Nép Tudományos és Ismeretterjesztő Kiadó, Budapest, 275.*

jurisdiction. “While arguing about education, feminists have listed examples of outstanding women to demonstrate: learning has not distorted femininity, what’s more, sex has nothing to do with cerebration. When feminists demanded for civil rights during democratic revolutions of the XVIII century, they pointed on political potential of queens and women like Jeanne d’Arc, arguing that political right cannot be withhold” (Scott 2001:11).

In the sixties, historians researching women’s issues not only aimed at manifesting women’s presence in history but sought for evidences, proving women also actively participated in history. They assumed that if female subordination was formerly assured by their invisibility, writing about societal struggles and political results may turn women visible, thus contributing to promotion of emancipation. Scott (2001) emphasizes: historians questing stories about female activity have not only published new information about women, but also initiated a new perception about what we consider as history. “When we question why these facts have been ignored for so long and how is it possible to understand them now, history becomes more than simple fact finding. Since new perspective of history depends upon viewpoints of historians and their ways of questioning, making women visible was no more a question of questing new data but one of exploration of new interpretations. These interpretations not only offered opportunity to a fresh view on politics, but also eased understanding the ever changing significance of family and sexuality” (Scott 2001:13). Thus historians provided practical evidence about everlasting differences among women, denying feminist discourse of a homogeneous female unity.

As a consequence of the above, history of feminists’ movements may be interpreted in the framework of continuous tension between unity and diversity. Suitable example is a feminist assembly held and documented in France in the beginning of the XX century, divided by the issue of class-hierarchy. The debate derived from a proposal claiming a day off for women servants, rejected by the majority saying girls will use free time for prostitution, and as consequence, Socialists charged feminism for representing only middle-class women’s interests. Some said solidarity between women of different classes may only be a utopia, but representatives of feminism – considering women as homogenous group and feminism as a movement of all women – argued that since there is no two female genders, separating feminism to a bourgeois and a socialist movement is also impossible. Feminist movements of the second half of XX century organized sessions pronouncedly on issues of heterogeneity, which, as a basis of their thematic rhetoric, considered for example problematic of class distinctions. Related example is the fact that in the USA of the seventies, afro-American women started to call themselves “coloured people” in order to point on that – without saying – feminism is a “white-skin movement”. They think female experiences cannot be interpreted without also considering racial issues, since differences between white and black women are deeply rooted, not allowing elaborating a common program. To illustrate it, Scott quotes a poet’s speech held in 1979 in New York: “If feminist theory of the “White America” has not to be engaged in diversity issues and consequential differences in suppression, then how do you consider the fact that while you attend a conference on feminist theory, women tidying up your houses are black and poor? What theory lies behind racist feminism?” (Scott 2001:17).

By the end of XX century, the approach of diversity became an important element of analysis, providing a new, interpretative framework, since differences and different female identities are interpreted as part of a given historical period.

As seen above, women’s history became an acknowledged issue in historiography from the seventies. The short period since then can be separated into three cognitional phases after

Andrea Pető (2001). First phase (1) is called Compensational or Separatist School, promoting the elaboration of “her story” instead of “his story”, fighting for visibility of women issues regarding both past and future. Efforts have been made to change renowned saying of Virginia Wolf (“history considers woman as an appendix”). Other products of the era were works picturing biographies of famous women: thanks to a rich scale of resources, these women’s lives – who proved to be successful even in the world of men –were easily available for researchers. Issues such as history of women’s institutions, education or fights for civil rights are also considered as parts of this period; what’s more, works about women employment, work at home and at workplaces, as well as family and reproduction issues also occurred in this first phase. Critics of this school argue that “every historical act or personality was seen as positive and remarkable only because it was female” (Pető 2001:43).

Second phase (2), the so called “Contribution School” started to examine women as separate group within social history, and borrowed methodology of other social sciences schools, such as sociology or ethnography.

These first two theoretical schools led to institutionalization of women’s studies. By the middle of the eighties (3) the discourse of gender has also been born, including also tools to examine forms of domination set up by men and women as well as differences determining them.

2. Gender Category in Public life Discourse

Birth of gender theory is related to de Beauvoir, who – with her widely famous sentence (“one is not born a woman, but becomes one”) – has first distinguished not analytical or political benefits of biological sex and gender (Beauvoir 1969). Initiating the notion of gender primarily aimed at question validity of the ruling theoretical rationale, originating sexual inequalities in natural and biological reasons, thus considering them as unalterable, fateful and determined facts. Gender differentiations, for example division of labour on a sexual basis are universal phenomena, but content of divided tasks changes culture by culture (Magyari-Vincze quotes Oakley, 2006). Birth of the notion itself proved to be a momentous step towards elaboration of paradigms which analyze women’s detriments and subordinated status from a critical approach. “Why did gender reciprocity never occur? How was it possible that a member of this reciprocal relationship could consider himself as important in absolute sense, rejecting reference with his correlative, determining her as a pure “other-existence”. Why don’t women themselves discredit male sovereignty? No subject considers itself a priori and spontaneously irrelevant; it’s not the “Other” determining the “One” through identifying himself as the “Other”; on the contrary, the “One” determines him as “Other” through identifying herself as the “One”. To avoid turn back from “Other” into “One”, the subject needs to submit herself to this totally unfamiliar viewpoint. And why do women willingly submit herselfes?” (Beauvoir 1969:13). The issue in the above form has been initiated into international literature in 1949. Dualism of sexes, like all dualisms, has provoked a number of conflicts, resulting in profound transformation of public opinion in the first phase of XX century. Beauvoir illustrates the era with famous saying of Bernard Shaw: “White American, after condemning the Black to shoe skinning draws the conclusion that the Black is not worth for anything else”. After him, in case people are hold in a subordinated existence, they will indeed become subordinated. As consequence, the question arose: should it remain the same? Most men living in the USA of the forties considered emancipation as a danger threatening his morals and interests. Certain

men were scared about women rivals, proved for example by a sentence of a university student boy (appeared in a contemporary journal): “every female student becoming practitioner, doctor or lawyer steals a place from us” (Beauvoir 1969). The sentence is seen as evidence on men’s insistent faith in their privileges. Another issue to consider was that emancipation not only threatens economic interests, since important benefit of suppression is that even the most miserable of suppressors can take himself as superior. As an example of Beauvoir tells that in southern states of the US, the poor White found consolation in the fact that he’s no case a “dirty Nigger”; and this pride of the poor has been masterly utilized by the rich White. According to the same logic, in this era even the most mediocre man could consider himself as “semi-god” compared to women. Nevertheless, in USA of the forties majority of men refused to make steps in order to probate his own societal advantages. They didn’t publicly stated that women are low, given they were much more penetrated by the idea of democracy to doubt the principle of equality. Practice shows the contrary: while men treat women with benevolence and approving of common interests, they do not want to consider its practical consequences. In case men disagree with women, men start to thematize practical inequalities, thus rejecting the idea of abstract equality. Situations where husband declares: his wife is not worth less because she has no skills or work and housework is just as important as any other work, but in case they have a quarrel, the first thing he will say is “you’d die of hunger without me!”. As conclusion, a particular context sets up where majority of men bona fide sounds gender equality, declaring women have definitely no reason to be pretentious, but at the same time they say: however women want, may never be equal with men. An explanation of this phenomenon may be a thought of Judith Butler (1990) saying: “relationship between masculine and feminine cannot be represented in a designating economy, where masculine embodies closed circles of designated and designating. Fairly controversially, Beauvoir has foreseen this in the ‘The Second Sex’, arguing that men are not capable of consolidating women’s issue, since they should play the role of both judge and contestant” (Butler 2006:55).

3. Gender in Scientific Discourse

“According to feminist interpretation, scientific observations (seen and respected as objective so far) have been made on an ideological (sexist) basis. Scientific statements derive from a one-sided observation: they only draw conclusions on experiences of men, generalizing conclusions for the whole society, even in terms of power structure. This ideology nets every aspect of life, assuring favourable positions for men, ignoring real values, needs and talent of women. Researches ruled by men have distorted reality. Women issues have not been considered as authentic since they were seen as driven by emotions. Trustees of real creation and universal knowledge could only be men, capable of independence and objectivity.” (Thun 1996:410). Category of gender is a basic regulative principle, determining sexual relations and environment, but after Thun (1996) it also determines to what extent a given culture and society render power to the person, how societal margin is set up, and what privileges are assured through determination of social institutions. Knowledge and science are also considered to be power factor and privilege, since principle issue of feminism are social determination, politics and ideology of knowledge. Feminist research focuses on the “woman”, investigates power structure from aspect of the oppressed, while it analyzes gender order which has essential role in reproduction of social inequalities and in structuring situations and experiences on the personal level (Magyari-Vincze 2006). Gender researches raise awareness on two issues:

first, gender is a central category structuring social inequalities, determining life outcomes and available social positions, thus gender relations have a hierarchic character on the macro-level (Belinszki 2003). Second, biological sex and gender are interrelated, therefore biological differences' direct interpretation into different social behavioural patterns, or deriving inequalities from biological roots is not possible and misleading. In her article published in *Hungarian Science* (2002), Judit Hell set up classic thematic groups of gender discrimination. Four areas are the field of education and training, equal rights in regional and national politics, women's status in family, marriage and private life, and the role they fulfil in economy. She considers the field of education and training particularly important, since in a globalizing society it has fundamental role in all aspects of female life. Equality of political rights investigates women's share in legislative and executive authority, since it has a crucial affect on women's capability for self-advocacy in almost all aspects of life. Analyzing female roles in family, marriage and generally in private life solely means a methodological distinction, since all aspects of private life penetrate the public sphere, and vice versa: exclusion from political power has consequences on private life. Analysis of women's role fulfilled in economy focuses on issues of the labour market, workplace-related questions, wages and career opportunities. Hell emphasises that the above issues are inseparable complexes of mutually interpenetrating questions, separable only for didactic purposes. Some infringements are criticized on the basis of principle values of modernity: personal freedom, right for self-determination, autonomy, equal human dignity or threat of equal opportunities (Hell 2002). Human rights, incorporating these values – admittedly born in the Western world – are seen as universal and inalienable, born with every human being; however, in a number of cultures – firmly keeping patriarchal traditions – these values and rights are considered to be unfamiliar and heteronomy and they especially do not prevail among female residents. In a number of countries limitations or withdrawal of certain rights such as right for property, right for initiating divorce, right of free movement, right of free marriage, rights concerning freedom in sexual life (rejection of a sexual act in marriage, right for conception or for abortion) still survive. Hell lists other particular female-related problems: dual load of women with housework and career; unrecognized value of household activities; not proportionate share of couples from housework, resulting in drastic dock of women's free time; legitimating violence inside family, what's more, in specific cultures tradition of genital concision; abortion of the conceived female embryo; neglecting nutrition of girl babies (especially in the third world) and finally prostitution and sexual trade.

Critical-theoretical basis of the gender-specific approach's societal practice lays in moral-philosophic values such as equality, justice or the assumption of proving universal human or moral rights. Thus, presence and extent of women's discrimination is analyzed in all spheres of life (including private one), where man-and-woman relations justifies it. Theoretical fields – such as gender-focused sociology, economics, philosophy and ethics, political philosophy, literature, psychology, linguistics, educational studies, anthropology, etc. – investigating and analyzing gender relations are formed according to fields, types and tools of gender discrimination. Emergence of a feminist research theory is part of the widely interpretative critical social sciences (Thun 1996), raising issues principally from viewpoints of power, economic status and historical embeddedness. They concluded that power structures and ideologies prevailing in society also prevail in scientific research, just as in any other area of society. According to Thun, this viewpoint has threatened particularly massive status quo of scientific world, also contributing to an epistemological breakthrough of postmodern.

3.1. Women's studies, gender studies

Women's movement also launched remarkable transformation in higher education, influencing more and more universities' life. Departments and research centres of women's and gender studies of the seventies and eighties emerged as a particular evolution process, nevertheless female perspective penetrated science from outside. As reaction of civil movements, feminist lecturers and student criticised content and methods of university education, emphasizing that higher education is an extremely influential mediator and maintainer of patriarchal structure, since it interprets and represents science in a unilateral and excluding way. Emergence and penetration of women's studies in universities and researches was a multi-step process. According to thematics of Éva Thun (1996), the first phase principally excluded women both from content and art of science. In the second phase – called “add women and shake it” – women appear as subject of scientific analysis: although women stepped out from invisibility and became subjects of scientific researches, methodology and conclusions still mirrored male perception. In third phase, women occurred as part of problem rising, as a particular subordinated group. This era focused on analysis of barriers hampering opportunities of women and other oppressed groups in a society which is principally built on general and systematic, historically embedded discrimination of women. According to Thun, none of these phases held profound transformation of attitudes, not allowing making investigations through female perception. Thus, significance of the fourth phase is evident, since “women are interpreted in their own explanative framework, relying on their own experiences and using their own terms”. In this era, female existence and experiences are assumed as valuable and authentic in all aspects. Women's studies as an official science emerged in the USA and in the UK during the sixties, and as we have just seen, gender concept soon became a central principle of order. Female experiences and thoughts became object of women's studies, evolving in the course of history, seen as necessary to modify androcentric (malformed) interpretation of human behaviour, culture and society. This approach rejects rigidity of traditional categories and labels, promoting flexibility of interdisciplinary approaches.

First officially acknowledged women's studies program has been launched in 1970, at San Diego State University, California. In Europe, women's studies also appeared in the seventies as part of women's movements. Universities provided courses for women's studies in the framework of sociology, history and literature; today it penetrates all fields of social sciences and humanities. Silius (2003) analyzing institutionalization of European women's studies identified four evolutionary phases. In the first “Activist” phase, women's studies were embedded in facultative courses; in the second, women's studies became an independent discipline, offering general and thematic courses, thus emerged an interdisciplinary coordinated education. Third phase is of professionalization, including entitlement of an independent faculty and colleagues of department, providing opportunity to launch post gradual programmes as well. In the fourth phase called “Autonomy” women's studies becomes a well-known discipline, possessing the same level of autonomy, financial background and accreditation as any other department of classic university fields. According to Silius, institutionalization of women's studies has serious barriers in case “of structures rigidly separating scientific disciplines, low level of university autonomy and strong political resistance towards women's movements. (...) Drivers of institutionalization are modular structure of university grades, opportunity of an interdisciplinary approach, as well as support of state feminism (in terms of equal chances and female politicians)” (Silius 2003:61).

Institutionalization of women's studies has not yet been completed in any countries: independent departments led by a professor of women's studies can only be found in western-European countries like France, Germany, Netherlands, Finland, and the UK. Note that women's studies may be the only discipline in higher education whose emergence has been realized only by women: academic women fought for its development, feminist researchers have launched first courses and women frayed out inclusion of the discipline into university framework.

As Katalin Koncz summarized: "Women's studies (...) is a feminist discipline, describing and analyzing female existence. In perspective of scientific history, it is a stage when feminist-focused sub-disciplines have been organized into an interdisciplinary science. Since it incorporates female perception of the world, some also considers arts and sciences worked out by women as part of women's studies. Its subject is female existence, although willy-nilly it bumps into men all the time. (...) Though women's studies is well aware of men, it only focuses on female existence, men are only involved in investigation as subjects of comparison. Thus it aims to redeem science's debt by revealing real circumstances of women, by mapping reasons of suppression, thus completing the process of scientific perception" (Koncz 2005:126).

Practical experiences of developed countries show that institutionalization of gender studies has brought a number of benefits: financial resources have been assured and infrastructure (courses, specializations, sub-disciplines) has been built to support it. At the same time, its evolutionary process lacked the discipline in itself: researchers of the issue have closed the tight scientific circle and became separated. In the course of conferences, they separately discuss research findings; they publish articles for each other in their own periodicals – as consequence, information about gender findings can hardly access wider public. A result may be that scientific perspective may tighten; also bearing political risk of being accused for scientifically embedded representation of a societal layer. Researches focusing on gender issues or women, especially if they aim at analyzing social inequalities, may easily be accused for being anti-masculine. All these considerations occur along debates about "autonomy or integration", which are part of the process of feminist researches' academic acknowledgement.

According to integration strategy, overall goal is that female perception and gender perspective have to be introduced in all disciplines and university programs for that they can promote receptivity of gender differences and inequalities as well as gender awareness. Arguments against integration point on the risk that feminist research's integration into conservative institutions may result in a loss of radical potential, therefore strategy of autonomy, aiming to set up independent programmes is seen as suitable direction of evolution. It's a strategy to elaborate a new type of discipline and academic structure, questioning traditional academic arrangement, but may bear risk of negative consequences of ghettoisation.

3.2. Gender-focused research methods and epistemology

Feminist theories and research methodology attempted to deconstruct (break down) the formerly uniform societal category of "women". According to Éva Thun, feminist scientists drew the revolutionary conclusion (still provoking debates) that "we can provide a more realistic knowledge, a much more punctual description of reality in case we analyze women's cultural and social existence, on the basis of assuming the existence of differences and polyphony between women. Realistic description can only be provided through analysis

of diversities' roots and their consequences in a cross-sectional view of societal determinations. Women's studies say consequences originating in ethnical and gender issues are particularly momentous" (Thun 2002:2). A number of conceptions have been born related to gender-focused research methodology. Harding (1987) say these shall be analyzed on three different levels, in terms of research tools, research methodology and epistemology.

Principle conception was that research shall mirror experiences of women, and qualitative methods are the most suitable for this purpose. Critics of this approach underline importance of quantitative methods as well, arguing the latter are suitable to reveal information and data about frequency and range of the given issue, thus making deductions about its importance on the macro-level. According to representatives of this approach, statistics may often be much more convincing than revealing narratives. Third approach says the best is to use both – qualitative and quantitative methods together ensuring suitable tools for research.

Another issue of gender-focused methodology is how to frame questions, how to use methods and tools and how to interpret research findings. Relevant researches frame questions in the context of power structures, relying on real-life situations, having the perspective of the oppressed. Nevertheless, researches of the field shall not aim at setting up theories; it shall draw attention on promoting societal issues of gender aspects, shall react and provide solutions. Societal benefit of the created knowledge is an important aspect: it shall generate changes in people's life by pointing on how power structure could be turned into a partnership, how social exclusion or gender-based (or other type of) discrimination could be eliminated.

Harding (1987) identifies and analyzes three gender-focused epistemological schools: empirical, perspectivist (standpoint) and postmodern feminist ones. According to Harding, empirical school set up in a context where feminist researches focused on self-legitimizing in the academic sphere; principles of the school were the intention of objectivity, neutral fieldwork and lighting reality from a female perspective. The argument, saying feminist are capable to describe women's experiences because they live them is seen as naive by Hardy. Perspectivist epistemology derives from Hegel's explanation, saying scientists and researchers bringing out women living in oppression are only capable of acquainting their problems because they act in a privileged state. This state is perspective of the subordinated subject, who has a more realistic perception of reality than the one in power position, who has no interest in changing status quo or considering social injustices.

Third school bears emergence of postmodern epistemological conceptions. The school gets square with the objectivist concept of justice by questioning the very opportunity of a universal, absolute truth, saying feminist knowledge is only one way of representing reality. The question then arises (answered by Haraway (1991)): why should feminist knowledge be better or more legitimate than any other non-feminist (or even masculinist) interpretation of the same phenomena? Haraway says: dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity shall be first resolved, arguing that while we always perceive reality from a given, subjective perspective.

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