



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Equality from the Top Down? Discourses of Gender Equality and Czech Societal Transformation

Topic of Research

My research investigates the production, circulation, and contestation of discourses of gender equality in the Czech Republic, not only the debates surrounding, and varying usages of, the term “gender equality,” but also culturally specific practices of their production, negotiation, and contestation. What on the surface appears to be a concerted effort, with accompanying common definitions, aims, and desired outcomes, upon closer inspection reveals itself to be a site of struggles and interactions among diverse interests, priorities and assumptions. These struggles manifest themselves in the form and content of policy decisions, social projects, protests actions and media representations, which in turn affect the daily lives of ordinary Czech people. In order to understand the impact (or lack thereof) of policies and programs designed to promote gender equality upon Czech society, I conducted ethnographic research in order to map the shape of the discourses of gender equality that are being articulated at the supranational, national, and local levels from the perspective of the practices of those involved, including investigation of the role of experts on gender in determining the form and content of these discourses.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field

This research project contributes to an understanding of the continuing ramifications of postsocialist transitions, to the burgeoning scholarship on the anthropology of expertise, and to the work of scholars, gender activists and policy-makers on interactions between supranational and national governing bodies and nongovernmental organizations in order to create effective policy that achieves its goals in a democratic and culturally appropriate manner. This study also contributes to interdisciplinary debates on how discourses are produced and promulgated, as well as to discussions surrounding the future shape and climate of an expanded Europe. My research project seeks to understand the “alternative visions” (Burawoy & Verdery 1998: 309) of gender equality that appear to perpetually complicate both the transition tales of “West” to “East” transmission of terminologies, conceptions, and ideals of equality between women and men, as well as the even larger discourse of a universal narrative of gender equality that resonates globally. Further, through the use of ethnography, my project reinforces the arguments of anthropologists that activities carried on “behind the scenes” and “on the ground” are relevant to the larger questions on the existence of postsocialist civil societies, the feasibility of supranational governance, and gender equality.

Approach and Methodology

In order to understand the circulation and contestation of discourses of gender equality, I explored them from the perspective of its producers at academic institutions, NGOs, and government offices in the Czech cities of Prague and Brno through in-depth ethnographic study. Using the method of ethnographic participant-observation, I immersed myself in the daily working lives of experts in order to get first-hand experience of how knowledge about gender is produced and proliferated. I conducted both informal and semi-structured interviews with gender experts in university departments and programs, research institutes, NGOs, and government offices, as well as carried out many hours of observation of meetings, seminars, conferences, workshops, trainings, classrooms, and events on gender issues. I have also collected documents such as the government reports, scholarly articles, research results, promotional materials, curriculum vitae, syllabi, textbooks, annual reports, and journal issues in which discourses of gender equality are circulated.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

Preliminary research findings indicate that discourses of gender equality are greatly influenced by activities undertaken in the governmental and nongovernmental sectors, particularly those experts who seek to produce new forms of knowledge about gender issues and those which seek to implement Europe-wide policies to promote gender equality.

The European Union has been very influential in bringing discussions about gender inequalities into the mainstream by issuing policy directives for all new member countries (including the Czech Republic) that include significant restructuring of ministries to incorporate posts responsible for gender in policy at all government levels. Further, the EU has a particular vision of gender equality that is presented to new

member states not only through policy but also through rhetoric and funding opportunities, which was developed largely without consideration of the socialist legacies of new member states. Although some efforts have been made to collaborate with regional gender experts to make EU machineries more sensitive to local contexts of new member states, Czech experts tend to be skeptical that these recommendations have been meaningfully incorporated into EU gender policies. However, according to some, participation of the EU in Czech debates about gender issues has also had the function of raising awareness among the citizenry about gender inequalities and thus improving support for such policy measures.

Research and scholarship plays a large role in the definition, circulation, and contestation of discourses of gender equality. NGO members often have academic backgrounds or other ties to universities and research institutes. Research on gender issues is carried out in both the governmental and nongovernmental sectors, with varying degrees of interaction among those carrying out this research. Much of the research on gender issues is funded by the European Union. As these projects tend to carry heavy administrative burdens and can be received for particular research themes only, experts express frustration at not having the freedom to pursue the types of research they consider to be the most valuable for their local contexts and instead are inclined to carry out research whose terms are set by outside bodies. Research conducted at NGOs is most often funded as part of projects that include both research and outreach or other applied activities.

Although the number of gender experts is small, they tend to work in small groups within academic institutions, NGOs, and government offices and do not always inform one another of each group's activities. Further, in this under-funded environment, there is fierce competition among groups of experts for project funding. As a result, expert groups are often guarded about their plans. However, there are also examples of successful collaborations among expert groups and between experts and government officials. This seems to be to a great deal dependent on the intentions and personalities of the individuals involved.

Government officials turn to gender experts in the nongovernmental sector for advice on how to interpret and implement directives, but there is also divergence between the different discourses on gender that are produced in different sectors. As a result, when governmental and nongovernmental experts collaborate or interact, problems can arise in how each party interprets and uses key terminology.

Further Research Agendas

While I was in the field I became aware of several other research projects being carried out on aspects of EU enlargement and gender equality issues in the Czech Republic, so I am sure that in the next few years we will have a wealth of information on this heretofore neglected topic. For myself, I discovered that little is known about how experts participate in the production and circulation of gender equality discourses or what role they play in shaping Czech gender policy and I intend to investigate this further.

US Policy Recommendations

Many of the recommendations I would give would be directed at the European Union rather than the United States. However, I can offer two recommendations of relevance to US policy makers.

Many people working in the area of producing discourses of gender equality are reliant on project grants with high bureaucratic requirements which can inhibit the amount of time and resources they can put into research and outreach activities. As a result, I recommend that more grants be made available that have a minimum of paperwork required. Further, as much of the existing funding for research and applied projects on gender issues is in the form of highly-regimented projects with a narrowly-defined scope, I also recommend the creation of more funding opportunities that will support a broader range of projects. This allows Czech experts to determine the projects that they believe are most needed in Czech society and improves the amount of self-determination of research and project priorities. This also lessens the amount of projects that are determined by outside bodies which may lack sufficient information and thus increases the effectiveness of funded projects by ensuring that a greater number of relevant projects are undertaken.

European Union activities have shown that it is possible to take governmental action to address gender inequalities, not only via labor laws but on many levels through support for research, education, training, outreach, applied projects, and other such methods. I would encourage US policy makers to seriously consider the ways in which the United States can learn from the European Union in this regard. I recommend the creation of a task force to study and report on EU gender policies and create a comprehensive national policy or set of policies on gender equality for the United States.