

Special Contribution

# **Negotiations and Boundary-Setting in an Illiberal Democracy: The Politics of the Exclusion / Inclusion / Excessive Inclusion of the Ochanomizu University Institute for Gender Research**

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## **1 Introduction: Gender Issues under Illiberal Democracy**

First, I want to give thanks for the chance to give comments at this very stimulating symposium. From Professor Pető's talk, we can understand now that, in Hungary today, gender research and issues of academic freedom and democracy are under attack from both overt violence and from power that attempts to operate invisibly. I have many years of engagement with gender studies and graduate-level studies at Ochanomizu University in Japan, so I also feel personally indignant at the Hungarian government's sudden elimination of the graduate program in gender studies. We must understand the significance of this and share knowledge about ways to counter it across borders and collectively.

This emergency symposium was held to counter the obvious attack on "academic freedom and democracy" by the government of Victor Orbán in Hungary, which banned gender research, and I understand that the aim is to counter such overt attacks and share knowledge about strategies. Promoting an anti-immigration policy, skepticism of the EU, and adopting a closer relationship with China, Orbán's right-wing government gained momentum after winning the second parliamentary election in 2010 and winning the National Assembly election on April 8, 2018. According to Prof. Pető's detailed

presentation, gender studies in Hungary today is exposed to a double attack under this right-wing government, facing both overt violence through threats and harassment delivered anonymously via the Internet and also confronting repression by power that seeks invisibility and operates through unilaterally implementing systemic changes and effectively hollowing out institutions under the guise of simplifying them. The Hungarian government's removal of the graduate program in gender studies at Central European University is shocking to anyone familiar with the high standards of gender studies education and research in Europe. I personally feel deeply angered at this measure because of my own long-standing involvement in gender studies and graduate-level education at Ochanomizu University. At the same time, I think that we must understand the background to these events and their significance in order to share knowledge about ways to counter such measures across borders and collectively.

Therefore, I would like to raise the following two points in my comments here. My first point relates to what Prof. Pető shared about the current attacks on "academic freedom and democracy" and "the problem of gender studies under an illiberal democracy," and my second considers the "backlash" to gender as it exists not only in Hungary but also elsewhere.

The term "illiberal democracy" indicates an official government that continues to operate under democratic procedures, such as elections, but may advocate not liberal democratic values but values associated with authoritarianism. After acquiring power, such a government demonstrates a high degree of arbitrariness in the executive branch in the policy decision process, and also displays a divergence between official statements and actual implementation (for example, while declaring freedom of information actually obscuring and discarding the most important information). Along with this, an illiberal democracy restricts fundamental freedoms associated with liberal democracy, such as of speech, belief, expression, and research, as well as of individual dignity, often framing such restrictions as "exceptions" and citing

reasons of security. And “gender” frequently becomes a target of such national governance. This gendered political approach is used to frame issues: for example, economic policy problems become defined by gendered expectations: e.g., discussions about budget allocations for childcare become defined as a problem of working mothers rather than an issue of working parents, thus pushing forward a topic that is easier to discuss and criticize in public, in this case sidestepping the issue of women working while raising children with issues about motherhood more generally. Behind this is the actual political use of naturalized ideas about gender that obfuscate the political and economic stakes of all these issues, and which actually targets and disciplines “women” and insists on individual psychological adjustment to the status quo.

My second point is related to the backlash to “gender,” which has developed into a confrontation in Hungary, but is a trend not only in Hungary and has been increasing in recent years.

In Japan, even after the 1990s, there were two waves of attacks and backlashes against gender in the early 2000s and also now, in the late 2010s. In my opinion, the two backlashes actually differ. Basically, the backlash regarding “gender” through the first half of the 2000s could not completely assimilate the evolving trend toward globalization and was instead formed as a neoconservative political movement under neoliberal economic policies but on the national level as a kind of “mourning the absence of the father and the collapse of the family.” On the other hand, the backlash we witness today is new inasmuch as it reflects the global shifts and hegemonic fluctuations that emerged in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis.

## **2 Gender in an Illiberal Democracy**

Professor Pető points out that the modern gender issue has become a “battlefield for socialization” in the Gramscian sense. This is the consequence of a series of neoliberal political and economic effects that causes friction between actors that can move freely at a global – or, more precisely, a

denationalized – level and actors confined to a national and local level. At the level of the nation state, this rift first becomes a battle over the legitimacy of accessing the ability of the state to redistribute resources, then comes into public consciousness as an issue of “subjectivization in society” and controversies arise over the possibility of expanding the realms in which political decision-making is possible. And in fact, it is this battle more than its consequences that makes the problem itself visible for the first time. What often appears at this time, reflecting shifts in gender identity, are also attacks on and interventions in the various expressions and discourses that seek to describe new sexualities, and on the gender studies and feminist theories that critique the existing gender order.

To restate the issue as I understand it: under neoliberalism – free marketism, financial liberalization, privatization of public resources, fiscal austerity / equilibrium, reduction of social security, personal responsibility – awareness of gender and feminism is actually raised in the context of a neoliberal focus on reducing public funding, particularly with fiscal austerity measures. We can see this trend very clearly in the EU countries that have prioritized policies of fiscal balance and austerity. This actually seems reasonable, given that under a series of policies implemented under the name of neoliberal policy, especially austerity policy, people are living and doing activism, hoping for more fundamentally democratic and diverse ways of being and living, even as their own ability and capability to reproduce themselves with their own power – and this is, I think, something we can call radical democracy in a broad sense – is being chipped away at. The de facto reduction in the level of human welfare achieved in the EU countries spills across the borders, at which time discourses about familialism and violence emerge. Regarding these circumstances, that is to say, the neoliberal project, the British feminist economist Susan Himmelweit said that neoliberalism is, in fact, not just policy but also contains a set of ideologies that allow people to accept and internalize the historically constructed devaluation of human life. In other

words, neoliberal policy, contrary to its appearance, has suppressed and understated the coexistence and sharing that enabled humans to thrive with such freedom and at such a level. Limitation of freedoms of study, expression, and speech at universities and public institutions also has the effect of threatening our shared knowledge and the decision-making rights of all parties concerned.

### **3 The Experience of the Ochanomizu University Institute for Gender Studies (IGS): The Politics of Exclusion / Inclusion / Over-inclusion**

Here, in connection with the points made above, and following Prof. Petó's example, I'd like to share my experiences as the head of the Institute for Gender Studies (IGS) at Ochanomizu Women's University to discuss the state of gender studies and education at Japanese women's universities, and its links to activism and international collaborative research, mostly from 2000 onward. I've divided this history into four periods:

#### 1. Pre-history: 1996-2000

- Established the first research facility for gender studies and named it the Institute for Gender Research.

#### 2. 2000-2008

- In 2003, Ochanomizu University adopted its 21st Century COE (Centers of Excellence) Program [a program established by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to fund globally competitive university education and research], "Gender Research Frontier (F-GENS)." Under F-GENS, advanced and interdisciplinary research on gender studies in Japan began in earnest, international collaborative research also began. Over 100 young researchers were involved in this project, and today it has grown into a major player in gender studies in Japan, and its research results have been recognized both domestically and internationally.

- 2005: The Graduate School of Humanities and Sciences established a

### Doctoral Program in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies

- 2006: The Graduate School of Humanities and Sciences established a Master’s Program in Gender and Social Science
- 2007: The Graduate School of Humanities and Sciences was reorganized as the Graduate School of Humanities and Sciences
- This made it systematically possible to obtain a doctorate in gender studies in Japan, and, in particular, made it possible to play a role in not only the humanities but also in the social sciences. For example, if the chief faculty examiner is a specialist in economics, law, political science, or sociology, a student can acquire a “doctoral degree in social science” and the English name registers as “Ph.D. Social Science / Gender Studies,” a title that evidences education as an international gender research specialist and that is accepted by international organizations.

### 3. 2008-2014

- However, when the 21st Century COE Program ended, the university authorities suddenly ordered that the Institute for Gender Studies (IGS) change its name by removing the term “gender” and replacing it with a title that used the term “women.” The Institute was notified that if they did not change the name accordingly, the IGS budget would be reduced to zero. Many outside and around the university still find these actions by the university authorities too cruel to believe, but I actually was not too surprised at all, having experienced the first backlash in the early 2000s. At this time, Professor Tachi Kaoru and I were the full-time professors at IGS and, after our discussion with the university administration, we immediately and firmly refused to change the name. At that time, I used a landline telephone, and I can still clearly remember the sound as I slammed down my receiver. I had no doubts. IGS responded that the social impact of such a name change would have an enormous social impact. After that, as expected, the budget from the university to IGS was reduced to zero (aside from minimal costs for basic

- maintenance), and an overt campaign against the Institute began.
- However, there was a strong awareness of the necessity of gender research and we were surrounded by a supportive community, and even if our institute was not appreciated within the university (apart from that of individual supporters), our research was respected beyond the university and even internationally. IGS was able to survive and continue to support cutting-edge research on gender studies thanks to various forms of external funding that came through in that time. During this time, the graduate school education developed, and established the first graduate doctoral course in interdisciplinary gender research in Japan to train professional researchers who both specialize in gender studies and also have social science qualifications, which today enjoys a good reputation domestically and internationally in academia, specialized institutions, and in the private sector. I would like to add here that during this period, I also heard many stories about our graduate students being harassed about specializing in gender studies, told that such research being foolish academicism or that they would become unemployable. But this is simply not true. I want to be very clear: the employment rates for gender researchers, including in academia, are good. It is a matter of course. Never succumb to threats. My seminar's motto was "You can't hammer down a nail that sticks out too far." I wonder about the employment rates of those faculty members who threaten graduate students.
  - Also, at this time, I realized that being confined to scholarly knowledge only within one's university can be fatally dangerous to gender research. I understood once again that it is literally essential to have constant exchanges with those outside of the university – international collaborations and interaction with the feminist movement – and in that way explore new ways to produce knowledge.

#### 4. 2015-now

- In 2015, the university authorities told me that the Institute for Gender Research, which had operated as an independent organization, would be reorganized as the “Research Organization for the Promotion of Global Women’s Leadership,” and I was dismissed as the Institute’s head without prior notice. From this period onward, the Japanese name for IGS also changed. While the official English-language name remains the same, in Japanese, the Institute ceased to be a “Center (*sentaa*)” for gender studies but became a “Place (*sho*, which can also be translated as “Institute”).” It also became incorporated as a subordinate organization within the Research Organization for the Promotion of Global Women Leadership. As compensation for the reorganization, the Institute was allocated a fairly generous budget and also more part-time staff.
- More time is needed to make a full evaluation of the current situation. I expect that gender researchers will analyze the history of IGS. I think we can understand the increase in funding and in staff as a good thing. But then, even when the budget is cut, gender studies would continue – it did continue. Even under those circumstances, a wonderful generation of researchers were brought up. However, I don’t think we can generalize from this experience even now.
- It is clear from global gender studies case that the targets of austerity policies are related to gendered circumstances. But unlike the EU experience, in Japan the response to the 2008 global financial crisis has been exhaustive monetary easing and a fiscal spending policy, which have given us a kind of bittersweet recognition. Gender research without budgetary provisions has clear vision, it doesn’t stray from its definite outline and goals. Needless to say, researchers carefully select research topics and freely choose their analytical methodologies. The actual substance of any guarantee of academic freedom is the total consent of the researcher, from their topic and their methodology, to their



conclusions and the critiques thereof. Since research is about exposing the contents of your head, you cannot proceed without first satisfying your own heart. Of course, you can rack up various “achievements.” However, if there are enormous budgetary provisions, there is also a risk that one’s “research topic” may be assigned, restricted, or directed. It is doubtful that such “research topics” passed down from higher up can be called “research” for the researchers. The problem, however, is how to negotiate and break through the boundaries within such an organization, dressed in illiberal democratic attire. There was a time when both gender studies and also the IGS bitterly experienced the honor of exclusion. However, if gender studies seems like it looks good and can be used, and if it can be used as a way to improve an international reputation, it will get a budget. But the budget itself does not mean free and democratic social inclusion. Rather, what we need to be most vigilant against are interventions into the content of research, and the manipulation and reorganization of our research topics when we receive funding. If it is public funding, freedom of research must especially be guaranteed. It is precisely because we are overly included, excessively embraced, by authority – authority that is budget-constrained, illiberal, surrounded by larger forces but puts on a democratic face – that we need to be cautious. This concept of excessive inclusion – “super inclusion” – originates in a term used to analyze modern financialization. It describes the excessive dependence on debt that led to the subprime financial crisis. A situation in which no research nor organization can exist independently of a budget constrained by a fixed timeline and a theme could be called “social super inclusion.” “Free research” under illiberal democracy is “free” under the limits of “social super inclusion,” but the knowledge that exists in the field can draw the boundaries for opposition.

#### 4 “The Failure of Neoliberalism” and the Polypore State

With the implementation of neoliberal policies, when a policy discourse of fiscal austerity or budget cuts emerges, it does not actually mean that austerity affects all equally. When the entire 100 percent becomes reduced to 80 percent, it does not mean a uniform 20 percent reduction across the board. The question is what category that 20 percent reduction comes from. In other words, “austerity” is policy of unbalanced reductions, fought out as a political process, in which some sectors remain untouched while others are cut altogether. The reason why social policies that address gender equality often become the target of this political fight is because it often becomes an attempt to recapture some standard of living once possible for people living in that society. This is the “battlefield around social issues” and without this battle people probably can’t make gains and truly enjoy them.

However, in order that people can make gains, there are reductions on the basis of free decision making and to make these reductions an ideology of arbitrary selection that nevertheless obscures its arbitrariness is necessary. Although often dubbed “neoconservatism,” what has become prominent after the 2008 global crisis has been the consequences of the fluctuations in the global economy, namely the emergence of a new ideology in the wake of the “failure of neoliberalism.”

In short, the backlash in the early 2000s was an attack on gender by a restored neoconservative ideology that could not cope with globalization. This movement, in spite of a national standard of living that had long shown signs of breaking, lamented the “weak father’s absence and powerlessness” and urged the rehabilitation of a lost gender order. This analysis was almost comical in its anachronism, but it was also extremely raw and violent.

On the other hand, after the 2008 global financial crisis, especially from 2010 onward, the failure of neoliberalism has actually led to a more general reduction in the value of human life, so we see more selective attitudes regarding humans: the politics of exclusion and discrimination have been

brought to the fore. People become discriminatory because they fear being discriminated against. One fears becoming the first target of the reduced value of human life. That fear is implicitly affirming, because it is sometimes endorsed by the arbitrary nature of authority and allows for a modification of the meanings of existing systems and their outcomes. In order to carry out the arbitrary selections of authority, segregations into excluded and also “super included” through budgetary measures and other political processes are introduced. To obscure the arbitrariness of this, the aggressive discourse of such segregations is more violent than ever.

I’ll add that, today, after confirming that the two waves of gender backlash since the 2000s are different in character, I’ll have to rethink them both. In response to the first backlash, in the early 2000s, as a way to end the neoconservative attacks, we defined gender as “socially constructed sexual differences.” We used such a binary discourse as a cobbled-together response to the backlash, and to that end, it could be seen, at least on a rhetorical level, as an approval to think of men and women in essentialist terms. We can try to excuse such essentialism as a strategy. However, as Shimizu Akiko has argued, in the early 2000s feminists could have seized the opportunity to re-examine the binary concept of gender differences and they should have offered a heartfelt welcome to those children who don’t fit in the binary gendered framework, those of diverse sexualities and of gender fluidity. The insufficient response to the earlier backlash is at the root of today’s backlash. It has been transformed into the violence of the essentialist discourse, revived precisely because we postponed working through it.

For that reason, the question is why we see the residue of such essentialism in the reappearance of a more aggressive and discriminatory ideology, and its newly adopted guise, after the global financial crisis. The reorganization of the Institute of Gender Studies in 2015 was designed to adapt to the Abe administration’s slogan of “creating a society in which all women shine” and the Act to Promote Women’s Empowerment. But as budgetary measures

accompany the implementation of policies that extol “shining women,” gender research is seeing reductions, and interventions make it more difficult to pursue certain research topics.

Prof. Petó introduced us to a unique and interesting definition for nations introducing this new ideology: she calls it the “polypore state.” In my opinion, this polypore state takes over one aspect of the currently existing nation state and then nests in it, multiplies itself in it, and ultimately corrodes it, achieving its objectives by replacing existing systems and using them. Issues related to gender are selected as targets to attack, and ideologies against gender equality and of the family are used. It appears to be a return to the past, but is actually a new phenomenon. In the polypore state, sexualism is strong, and in the aspect of the connections made between public institutions funded by taxes and privatized organizations, it also seems to be a widespread phenomenon. The ideology now concealing the arbitrariness of this form of authority is strengthening.

This leads to a society in which the arbitrariness of power supersedes the law of national governance. This is by no means some ancient artifact. Rather, this change in the state of national governance is a consequence of the transnational economic activities of global capitalism. A situation has emerged from modern law-based states in which global political and economic power has been acquired by arbitrary few. This power is now de-nationalized. And the ordinary people who live on the national and local level have to accept this at the cost of a reduction in the value of human life. This is painful. We must keep in mind that the transformation of how the national state is ruled is an ongoing political issue.

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