

# THE OTHER DEANS RESPECTED ME AS A DEAN, BUT WOMEN'S STUDIES WAS A JOKE TO THEM.

INTERVIEW WITH ELŻBIETA OLEKSY.

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**Marcela Linková: The Women's Studies Centre at the University of Łódź celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year. In your presentation at the anniversary conference last year you mentioned several individuals who in an indirect way helped with the establishment of the Centre (colleagues in the US, the rector of the University of Dijon who, together with his wife feminist wife, was your friend). What were then the main factors that made it possible for you to get the Centre on its feet and going?**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** From 1989 to 1991, I spent two years in the United States, one year as a visiting scholar at the University of Pittsburgh (Pitt), the second year – as a visiting professor at a college for women (Southern Seminary College [Southern Sem.]) in Virginia. The contrast was astounding! At Pitt I was totally exposed to feminism through my lifelong friend, Prof. Helena Goscilo who, just as other western colleagues who smuggled books on "forbidden" postmodernism to communist Poland, brought books and articles on feminism. She used to buy good wine at Pewex (a hard currency store), which was otherwise inaccessible, and all three of us (Helena, my husband Wiesiek, and I) drank the wine, and talked postmodernism and feminism. During the year at Southern Sem., I tried to pass the newly gained knowledge on to my American students, with some success. Feminism and women's studies (not yet gender studies at that time) were "in the air," and women's studies centres or programs were mushrooming throughout the US but none in Poland. This is how I got the transplant idea.

**Marcela Linková: In retrospect, is there anything you would have done differently today?**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** Not really, though getting such a centre on its feet, as you say, could be much easier to accomplish today. A centre or another university structure focusing on women's issues is no longer perceived as strange or amusing. What might be still difficult to accomplish is a BA or – even more importantly – MA in Women's/Gender Studies. We have a Master in International Gender Studies at the University of Łódź, and I know how difficult it was for me to convince the Faculty Council and – later – the Senate of the University of Łódź – to vote for it.

**Marcela Linková: How was the establishment of the Centre perceived at the University? Did you encounter any critical reactions or was the milieu mostly supportive? And how has the situation changed over the last two decades?**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** It all happened in one day. Well, of course I first wrote a proposal, discussed it with a number of associates. The Dean of the Faculty of Philology, where I worked at that time, was positive, and so was the Rector of the University of Łódź. The meeting of the Senate of the University of Łódź, at which I presented the project of the Centre, was divided on the issue, but – just imagine: it was 1992! The majority of members voted positively. All this happened on February 18, 1992. The Center was established! It was the first Women's Studies Center (WSC) not only in Poland but also in Eastern/Central Europe. Of course, there were lots of critics, many more than supporters. But it was never threatened with closure. As you know I was a dean for eight years, the only female dean, and this helped. The other deans respected me as a dean, but – to them – women's studies was a joke! I had to live with it, and it made me stronger.

**Marcela Linková: You have succeeded in establishing the Centre as an important academic nexus internationally. How did you start building the networks and cooperation?**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** I'll reverse the order and first off mention GEMMA, which is our trademark at the university and constant source of satisfaction. But we were also partners in an international consortium within Marie Curie Early Stage Training (doctoral training project) with six EU universities: Utrecht University (coordinator), University of York, Uni-

versity of Bologna, University of Linköping, Cornelia Goethe Centrum in Frankfurt, and Lubljana Graduate School in Humanities. This gave us an opportunity to design doctoral courses which have come handy now when the Faculty of International and Political Studies joined forces with the Faculty of Philosophy and History and created the Interfaculty Studies in the Humanities, and can and does use our expertise. In fact, it is difficult to single out, from the list of many research projects, those which impacted on our “growth” more than others. Still, I’d like to mention perhaps two or three: ENWISE project the aim of which was to provide detailed analysis of the situation of women scientists in Central and Eastern Europe (every country was represented by an expert). Under the leadership of Brigitte Degen from the European Commission, we researched and wrote a report “Waste of Talents: Turning Private Struggles into a Public Issue: Women and Science in the Enwise Countries”, which was published by the European Commission in all national languages of the region, as well as in English.<sup>1</sup> This initiative, in turn, led to the project on women in science in Central Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia).

**Marcela Linková: I am glad you mention the Enwise report. It has been a very important achievement as the fairly solid and uniform picture of women’s discrimination in academia was challenged by some of the differences in Central and Eastern Europe. It was also for the first time that the issue of gender equality in science in Central and Eastern Europe received attention in many of the countries. What were the main challenges in reflecting on post-socialist realities in terms of gender and science in the Enwise group?**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** Well, I think the main challenge was the discrepancy between propaganda and reality. Whereas communists instigated, one might say, a “gender policy” whereby men and women “enjoyed” the same rights in terms of full employment and access to education, at the same time the system practiced horizontal and vertical segregation in all areas of employment (research and higher education included).

**Marcela Linková: What were the major milestones in your international visibility?**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** All kinds of expert work for the European Commission: ENWISE project and, following, WS Debate project focusing on Central Europe, as well as other expert jobs (evaluator and observer in Framework Programme 6 and 7), but also directly advising the Commission in High-Level Panels, such as “Five-Year Assessment of European Research Programmes and Institutions” (2004-2005). And, most recently, I completed and presented in the European Parliament what they call the briefing note on “Women in political decision-making: the role of the media”, as an element in the preparation for the parliamentary elec-

tions next year. Women in Czech Republic and Poland don’t do well in statistics, both in European and national parliaments. But this is a different story. One of such milestones was for me a 3-year tenure as President of Association of Institutions of Higher Education and Research in Europe – AOIFE. It ended with the 6<sup>th</sup> European Gender Research Conference “Gender and Citizenship in a Multicultural Context,” at the University of Łódź, August-September 2006. This huge conference gave us visibility in and outside Poland. It attracted famous feminists and men and masculinity studies scholars: Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti, Jackie Stacey, Nina Lykke, Jeff Hearn, Keith Pringle, and many others. More funding for the Centre followed, and the Senate voted for an MA in International Gender Studies.

**Marcela Linková: Do you see any change in the profile of your students, their expectations and interests? Have you in any way modified the curriculum – perhaps also in response to the growth of the Centre’s international cooperation and ties?**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** Of course we modified the curriculum. The first courses offered by the centre were very introductory. We then set up a MA in International Gender Studies.

**Marcela Linková: European networking and funding were obviously crucial for the Centre. Have you, in time, managed to secure funding and grants for the Centre locally in Poland?**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** In 2005 we had a whole curriculum of courses for the graduate major in Gender Studies, and it was offered in English as international gender studies at the Faculty of International and Political Studies. There was a radical turn in politics when the rightist party, Law and Justice, came to power in Poland. This affected us approximately two years later, when J. Kaczyński, the leader of the rightist, populist party, Law and Justice, had to step down as Prime Minister and – aided by his twin brother, then the President of Poland Lech Kaczyński and the radical wing of Catholic Church hierarchy – started to organize opposition to the liberal Civic Platform. All of this did affect our enrollment figures and the program was suspended for a year. I’d note though that whereas gender studies institutions and programs flourish in many “old” member states” of the EU, they are scarce in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) and rarely offer undergraduate, let alone graduate, study programs. Expanding unemployment and increasing demographic decline affect university enrollment figures in CEEC, which translates into young people’s decisions to seek degree programs in areas that are more likely to give them jobs in the future. Only non-degree programs on gender issues addressed, for instance, to school teachers attract larger student populations. But actually, you see, we could continue a major under a slightly different cover. Our long-time

partner, Instituto de la Mujer at the University of Granada, Spain, invited us to join forces with 6 other EU universities and apply for an Erasmus Mundus in Gender Studies (GEMMA). The project, designed by its Coordinator, Adelina Sanchez Espinoza from the University of Granada, was immensely successful, so she reapplied this year for the continuation of the project, and not only did we succeed, but the project was singled out by the European Commission as Master of Excellence. GEMMA has its own unique curriculum that reflects new theories in feminist and gender studies. The majority of our students, who choose WSC as a home or mobility institution, come from so-called Third Countries.

To wrap-up, the day-to-day functioning of the Centre, which has one research-administrative assistant, is covered by the University. Our programme is offered in English. Most of the faculty teach in 2 or even 3 programmes, and we sometimes rely on faculty from other departments. So, this is not a problem. But then also we pursue other grants.

**Marcela Linková: Where do you identify the biggest obstacles to gender equality in science in Poland today? Do you continue to be active in this domain? Has the University of Lodz adopted any measures to advance gender equality in higher education/science?**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** The answer to these questions is: no. I find the main obstacles in traditional upbringing. A high percentage of Polish families are catholic, and Catholicism observed by Poles is very traditional. Most Poles are against same sex partnerships/families, against *in vitro*, the whole packet of liberal laws. And they don't question gender relations. It worries me a lot. Women are not well represented in national and European level politics (e.g. in European Parliament). There's still much wanting. And the University of Lodz has not adopted any measures to advance gender equality. My team were partners in a project in FP7 scheme last winter, but it didn't succeed. FP programmes are ideal for this kind of thing. I don't know if we are going to repeat the effort – it takes a lot of time. Still we do what we can through the projects geared to high school teachers. I don't teach in that programme but hear that the teachers are enthusiastic, so – hopefully – this will influence their work and we'll get more savvy students in our Master. Most of our students come from abroad, many of them from the so-called Third Countries. Isn't that interesting?

**Marcela Linková: Is the Centre involved in local activism and politics in Lodz, or do you maintain academic distance? Are there issues where you're locally vocal?**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** I wouldn't call it "academic distance" but yes, we offer an MA with six EU universities and Uni-

versity of Rutgers in the US within the Erasmus Mundus Scheme, and we've just applied for a PhD programme within Life Long Learning scheme. Colleagues in the Centre offer programmes and workshops for local teachers, and I personally hold them in high esteem. They use their new knowledge in teaching school kids, and this cannot be overstressed enough. And we also work with the Plenipotentiary of Equal Rights at the City of Łódź level. We take part in the Congress of Polish Women, both centrally and locally.

**Marcela Linková: To close, what's your vision of the future of feminism? There is a lot of shifting, feminism continues to survive in academia but spaces for its articulation is narrowing; many activists are today involved in policy bodies which may sometimes place limits on how critical they can be...**

**Elżbieta Oleksy:** Well, this is a good question. Feminism has now been channelled online and made accessible to millions of women. Models of activism have changed. Whereas some feminists still organize grassroots conferences and meetings (especially in Central and East European countries), take part in manifestations against homophobia, celebrate Women's Day on March 8, young women, like my students, delve into feminism in private, on the net. Take, for instance, intersectionality, the concept that has been around for almost 30 years, and how discussions about it have changed because of recent developments in social computing technologies which give people the tools to join diverse social networks and create niches for "living" intersectionality and voicing specific forms of lived experience. I think that here is the future. Feminism cannot blind us to other than gender forms of oppression, such as disability, sexuality, racism, and homophobia; conversely, feminists should be more sensitive to any form/forms of oppression. It's funny, how some "older" feminists (like myself) – say Luce Irigaray and Elaine Showalter – distance themselves from the second wave of feminism. Irigaray protests being called a feminist! I don't because where would we be if not for the second wave? Answering your question directly: I think we, as feminist teachers, as well as scholars, should be sensitive to all forms of oppression.

#### Notes

**1** The report is available online at [http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/document\\_library/pdf\\_06/enwise-report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/document_library/pdf_06/enwise-report_en.pdf) (note: ML).

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