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PROMOTING TRANSNATIONAL GENDER EQUALITY EDUCATION: ICELANDIC ACADEMIC AND GOVERNMENT AGENDAS

ABSTRACT: *The article discusses the origins and development of an international gender equality teaching program (GEST) at the University of Iceland, which is directed at students from low-income and post-conflict societies. By placing GEST within the historical context of gender education and feminist politics in Iceland and by engaging with the program’s philosophical and political underpinnings, the purpose is to explore its impact on feminist thinking and practice. The program is guided by notions of transcultural understanding and cooperation—where social responsibility, collective action, and ethics of care play a significant role in promoting gender equality and social changes. While GEST is part of Iceland’s development policies with its heavy emphasis on gender equality—and funded by the Icelandic Foreign Ministry—it is not concerned with exporting a specific equality model or imposing Nordic standards or policies. Every effort is made to avoid practices that favor devolution into normative relations of patronage that characterize global Northern engagements with the Global South. The premise is that by thinking of, and engaging critically with, development discourses from transnational and feminist perspectives, it will be easier to offer new ideas of transcending state borders and to facilitate inclusion and reconciliation. Finally, by focusing on teaching practical ways to implement changes, the goal is to encourage students to think about what kind of ideologies these practices produce and how they construct “femininity” and “empowerment.”*

KEYWORDS: The GEST teaching program; gender equality; feminist theory and praxis; development politics; ethics of care.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, there have been increased calls for reforming international organizations and for alternative humanitarian commitments beyond the interests of nation-states. This agenda has been promoted as part of the practice of ethical politics rooted in the ontological position that humans owe their existence to others and are responsible for them. Concepts like “generosity” and “unconditional hospitality” have

been used in an attempt to translate social and political relationships into practices of welcoming, courage, and solidarity. Echoing these ideas, the Gender Studies and Training Program at the University of Iceland (GEST)—an educational program directed specifically at students from low-income and post-conflict states—has concentrated on developing practices of transcultural sharing and solidarity by engaging in dialogues and information exchange. This chapter deals with GEST’s contribution to feminist thinking and practice within a broader global framework. It is divided into three parts: first, it puts GEST within the historical context of gender education and feminist politics in Iceland; second, it sketches the program’s beginnings and development; and finally, it engages with its philosophical and political underpinnings.

2. Historicizing Gender Education in Iceland

The struggle for women’s rights played a significant part in the development of Icelandic society and politics in the 20th century. The active participation of women in all societal spheres, in the present, is a testament to the success of activists who led this fight. Iceland has been at the top of the World Economic Forum “Global Gender Gap Index” for the past 15 years. According to its 2024 survey, Iceland has closed over 93% of the overall “achievement gap” between women and men in four key areas: health and survival; political empowerment; economic participation and opportunity; and educational attainment (see World Economic Forum, 2024). What has contributed to this achievement is that Iceland is among the most affluent countries in the world, enjoying economic and political stability and peace. Yet the groundwork was done by three generations of women, whose political involvement was instrumental pursuing a gender equality agenda. As a result of their work, social and legal measures were enacted to address gender equalities, which have enabled women to take an active part in public life.

The University of Iceland, which has committed itself to gender equality and diversity, has adopted an ambitious equality policy that encompasses both staff and students. The policy was originally devised by feminist researchers working at various departments at the university; more recently, disabled and transsexual students have been active in advancing this agenda. Academic research in the field of women’s studies and feminism has been conducted at the university since the early 1970s. As the only university offering a gender studies program, it is taught within the Political Science Faculty at the School of Social Sciences, and offers BA, MA (taught primarily in Icelandic), and PhD degrees as well as a postgraduate diploma in practical gender studies. Gender research is also conducted by other university departments, especially, at the School of Humanities, but also at the School of Education. RIKK – Institute for Gender, Equality and Difference, which was established in 1991, is the leading institution in the field of women’s gender and equality research at the

university. It works with academics from the five Schools of the University of Iceland as well as with colleagues from other universities and institutions. RIKK is part of many European and Nordic networks and international research projects and offers advice to government institutions and civil society organizations. It also administrates, and provides funding, for research projects, organizes conferences, and runs a public lecture series, symposia, and workshops. It collaborates closely with the GEST program and EDDA, a Research Center in Critical Contemporary Research within the School of Humanities, with emphasis on (in)equality and difference.

RIKK and EDDA initiated the GEST program in 2009. A key motivation was to address gender injustices, both in rich and poor societies, reflecting feminist criticisms of “realist” definitions of security as being too state-centric. Instead, the stress was on “human” or “individual” security, with a broad definition of the security concept that encompasses both the private and the public and that engages with structural impediments to gender equality. EDDA and RIKK still provide support for GEST by contributing to academic research on gender, difference, and equality and by their collaboration with international research institutes and organizations. GEST has also contributed to EDDA’s activities because of its ability to attract renowned academics to teach in the program, who have, then, established links with Icelandic scholars. In short, this institutional collaboration has raised GEST’s academic profile and enhanced its international reputation as a teaching venue.

GEST was established through an agreement between the University of Iceland and the Icelandic Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which had previously highlighted gender equality in Iceland’s development and post-conflict policies. Subsequently, GEST became accredited as part of the United Nations University (UNU) as a third partner. In 2019, after an organizational change, GEST joined the other three Icelandic former UNU programs (the Fisheries Training Program, the Geothermal Training Program, and the Land Restoration Training Program) under an Iceland-based umbrella organization GRÓ – Centre for Capacity Development, Sustainable Use of Natural Resources, and Societal Change. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) became involved in the program as an international partner, replacing UNU, with GRÓ operating under its auspices.

The stress on gender equality in Iceland’s foreign policy can, to a large extent, be ascribed to feminists who were active within and outside political parties; they pushed for gender equality reforms by offering a powerful societal critique, which laid the groundwork for the adoption of policies and legislation in this domain (Erlingsdóttir, 2021: 94; Enloe, 2013: 77). The widespread inclusion of gender issues in government policies—which was initiated in the late 2000s by Foreign Minister Ingibjörg S. Gísladóttir, the leader of the Social Democratic Alliance—was a direct legacy of the Women’s Alliance, a women’s only political party that played a key part in increasing women’s representation in parliament and other political institutions in the

1980s (Ómarsdóttir, 2010: 73–94).

It is common to present gender-equality expertise as a form of Nordic nation branding, even if there are differences among the five Nordic states. The EU Nordic states—Sweden, Finland, and Denmark—have sought to influence the policies of other EU member states, whereas Norway’s and Iceland’s focus has been on promoting gender equality in developing and post-conflict countries (Cull, 2016: 156). The case for the GEST program was made by academics who argued that if Iceland were to sponsor development projects in geothermal energy, fisheries, and land restoration—projects that had gained broad visibility and recognition abroad due to Icelandic expertise in these fields—gender equality was another domain where Iceland had a role to play internationally. Thus, GEST’s activities and funding reflect efforts to play up Iceland’s strength in gender equality, and it has become an integral part of Iceland’s foreign and development policy agenda. Yet the program is not an attempt at exporting the Nordic Equality Model, as some have suggested (Thorvaldsdóttir, 2011: 413). The mission and academic aims of GEST are to engage critically in the debate over gender equality, not to impose standards or policies on women. The driving force behind the project is a critical and, in some fields, radical, feminist stance on development and international politics. This means that its content does not always dovetail with the Foreign Ministry’s agenda, even if it is committed to the promotion of gender equality. Needless to say, it is a challenge to be an academic program funded by a government that may pursue policies that may run counter to its philosophy. But GEST has successfully insisted on maintaining total control of its academic program, which has enabled it to keep an academic distance from specific government policies.

3. GEST as a Cross-Cultural Education Program

The GEST program is about promoting gender equality and social change in lower-income, conflict, and post-conflict countries. It encompasses three spheres: policy research; a studies program; and a platform for transnational knowledge sharing. The main activity is a five-month intensive 30 ECTS postgraduate diploma program. In addition, GEST offers short and online courses, PhD scholarships, participates in applied projects and research, sponsors a lecture series, conferences, and expert meetings, and contributes to social media through blog series and podcasts.

The postgraduate studies program commences in early January and ends in late May each year. The fellows receive a postgraduate diploma in International Gender Equality Studies from the University of Iceland after a successful completion of their studies. The graduates finish five to six modules in addition to that of a final written assignment, which involves either a research-oriented work (an essay or a Ph.D. proposal) or a

project proposal (an applied project)—both dealing with gender equality issues in the students' home countries. The program seeks to produce an educational experience with diverse academic and cultural perspectives for the purpose of facilitating knowledge sharing between academics and practitioners from different parts of the world. The goal is to educate and train young professionals and early career researchers in gender equality methods and theories and to prepare them for implementing gender-sensitive projects in their respective countries. The number of GEST graduates has increased considerably since 2009. As of 2024, 241 fellows have graduated from the program, 169 women and 72 men, from 38 countries. The students work and/or study in the field of gender studies or a related field at educational institutions, government ministries and agencies, and civil society organizations.

The curriculum is based on theories and practices in gender equality and on development studies, where a multidisciplinary approach is adopted. GEST's Icelandic and international staff—around 40 instructors—from five continents teach the modules every year. It is a group of gender equality scholars and experts who represent the students' geography as well as a diverse spectrum of study fields from the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, medicine, education, and technology. GEST has encouraged interdisciplinary collaboration through the creation of specific modules focusing on gender and the labor market; gender and security; gender and health; gender and education, and gender and the environment. The purpose is to stress how and why women's participation in peace-building and reconciliation after conflicts is crucial in achieving gender equality. The program integrates gender into health, economics, security, and education as well as into environmental issues, such as climate change. While gender equality remains a core value of the GEST program, it has expanded its intersectional involvement and focuses also on issues relating to LGBTQI+, disability, race, and class. In addition, GEST runs research projects and sponsors Ph.D. research that is based on one of GEST's pillars: global gender equality, sustainability, human security, and societal transition. Among its most visible activities involve open online courses that have reached a large international audience. The program has also developed short courses in cooperation with ministries, institutions, and organizations in partner countries. It includes, for example, courses on gender and climate change and on teaching gender to youth in cooperation with partners in Uganda and Malawi.

4. The Ideas behind the GEST Program

One year before the GEST program was launched, Iceland's banking system collapsed under the weight of the global financial crisis in 2008. As result, the government was forced to implement budget cuts

that negatively affected the financing of GEST. At the same time, however, the experience provided the program with a useful baseline. It demonstrated the failings of broadly accepted North-South binaries: that Western discourses on “weak” states and “state-building” in developing and conflict or post-conflict countries ignored societal failings in the global North. What the financial collapse in Iceland showed, in particular, was the hypocrisy of elites when lecturing “developing” countries about governance or ethics. Iceland became an example of a societal trajectory, which it had ascribed to the Global South. It also felt the consequences of what Arjun Appadurai (1996) dubbed “mobile sovereignties,” that is, the interference of external powers or international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (see also Pandolfi, 2002: 212–213), when it sought financial support to respond to the crisis. It proved to be hard for the Icelandic political elite to accept “conditionalities” of international institutions since it was put in the same category as the recipient countries of its development policies. Betraying a deep sense of insecurity, the Prime Minister of Iceland, Geir Haarde, was keen on making it clear that he had extracted a promise from the IMF that Iceland would not be treated like a “Third World” state (Gunnarsson, 2009).

The Icelandic crisis was used by the GEST program to highlight the breakdown of the artificial division between “developing” and “developed” states; it sought to resist notions of knowledge production and transmission, where particular nation-states and people represented authority and the rest were supposed to follow their guidance. Instead, the emphasis was on trans-cultural ideas and dialogues, where experiences and knowledge of students are not only taken into account but also valued. The program is, thus, guided by the ethical principle of social responsibility, an ethics of care, and a relational ontology. Further, it is strongly directed towards action and transformational change. It identifies social, economic, cultural, and political processes that contribute to the subordination of women and other vulnerable communities and ways to counter them.

GEST makes no attempt to offer moral lessons on gender equality, but it uses Icelandic experiences to make certain arguments about policy-relevance. It is concerned with explaining and understanding Iceland’s policies with respect to women’s inclusion and gender equality and with the question of whether they are transferable. It stresses that gender equality requires collective action and solidarity of women human rights defenders, political will, and specific means, such as legislation, gender budgeting, and quotas. Further, it is made clear that there is no single way to achieve gender equality or a blueprint to follow. The Nordic countries have been seen by many observers as a model to be emulated, but their gender equality performance is far from perfect and needs to be dealt with critically. As the Danish scholar Drude Dalerup (2006, 2007) has pointed out, while the Nordic social model is respected globally, it does not mean that it is suited for all other cultures; diverse cultures and political, social, and economic conditions call for different approaches. Gender-related problems, however, remain similar and resonate across diverse geopolitical spaces. The pervasiveness

of gender-based violence and violence against women and girls is a testament to the force of feminist criticism of realist definitions of security as being too state-centric.

GEST has made vision and action central to its study and training program. It not only seeks to disseminate knowledge already in place about gender equality as well as parity in the broader sense of the word. It also builds on known epistemological methods of identifying problems, articulating the potential for change, and developing strategies to fight against inequalities. The premise is that by thinking critically from interdisciplinary, trans-cultural, and feminist perspectives—of such problematic terms as “development” or “peace-building”—it will be easier to offer new ideas of transcending state borders and to facilitate political reconciliation and transcultural understanding and cooperation. Rich societies are often in the position of being able to transmit skills and educational opportunities. Yet much needs to be done to disseminate them in a way that does not promote political and cultural supremacy. There has been of late much international support for local ownership of development projects or local self-rule in post-conflict states. Yet the reality is often different and steeped in prejudices. It can take many forms, for example, through Western stigmatization of poor and conflict-ridden societies as being “corrupt,” or in pathological terms, as “sick.” One of the main challenges of the GEST program is to resist such political and cultural power displays by engaging critical and decolonial feminist thinking.

Although GEST is an independent academic program, it is part of Iceland’s foreign policy and a development cooperation strategy in which gender equality is far from being projected in radical terms. The same applies to UN policies and documents where the women’s rights approach is still informed by liberal conceptions of gender equality. Similarly, being part of the international “aid industry” raises ethical questions since unacceptable conditions are often sustained through aid agencies. Palestine, which is one of GEST’s partner countries, is a case in point. Women’s lack of access to decision-making in politics and the economy is one of the key challenges that GEST grapples with. This is also what UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security seeks to address, a resolution of relevance to many of the GEST students’ national contexts.

The GEST program engages critically with UNSC Resolution 1325 as an instrument of gender equality. The enforcement of the Resolution has been inherently flawed since peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction efforts—under the supervision of Great Powers powers or international organizations—are dominated by men. What is more, the UN itself has often violated the spirit and letter of the Resolution in its international peacekeeping missions—through the infantilization of local populations and through the framing of post-conflict reconstruction in terms of a “learning process.” Nonetheless, Resolution 1325 also offers the potential to promote women’s rights and to hold international institutions accountable if they ignore it. Indeed, it can be used as an instrument to draw attention to the “free rider” legal status of personnel of international

institutions—such as the UN, the European Union, NATO, and the OSCE—in places of interventions, whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Libya, or the former Yugoslavia, where there was minimal local oversight over policy decisions made by external powers.

GEST is well aware of normative engagements with post-conflict or conflict-ridden countries, which sometimes serve the purpose of legitimizing foreign control over societies and of elevating the status of peacekeepers or development “experts” at the expense of the local population. Another such form is sending young inexperienced people to post-conflict countries—with no local experience or knowledge—and let them earn 20- or 30-fold the average wage of the local community. The exercise of such economic and political power has bred class-based resentment towards Western “identity entrepreneurs” in lower-income and conflict and post-conflict contexts in the guise of peacekeeping or development workers. It has also led to corruption among the internationals themselves who can buy whatever they please at the local level and who enjoy immunity from prosecution for crimes, even if this involves participation in sexual violence, prostitution, and trafficking. Local populations often feel powerless to criticize representatives of foreign countries or international organizations because of unequal power relation and because of their dependence on development or post-conflict reconstruction assistance. What makes it even more difficult is that local elites usually collaborate with international institutions or external actors.

GEST does not only discuss equality and what equality should mean but also dissects key concepts such as “development,” “peacekeeping,” and “democracy.” In addition, the program explores the role of gender within the context of environment and climate change. One module deals with the transformative potential of gender equality to advance environmental sustainability as well as vulnerability, mitigation, and adaptation to global environmental change. Sustainability is central to the activities of GEST; the concept is used as a reference point with which to measure whether practices or policies are worthy of support. It includes a forward-looking social justice agenda and is a reminder of the failure of a capitalist economic system by allowing outrageous global inequalities. Yet sustainability is only as positive as the thing that is chosen to sustain. This is forcefully argued by Cynthia Enloe (2017), who taught for many years at the GEST program. Enloe focuses on what she terms the “sustainability of patriarchy,” its resilience, and its survival and on the need to counter it. It is a system that produces inequality, with consequences that run far deeper. It is an order contingent on dividing people into the “superior” and the “inferior,” the “touchable” and the “untouchables” on the basis of race, gender, caste, religion, or sexuality. Enloe shows how complicity reinforces discrimination, with masculinization and militarization interacting in a dialectic relationship. Yet sustainability is also significant for attempts to take on patriarchy and other systems of global and local inequalities.

Finally, the GEST program focuses on teaching practical ways to implement changes. The purpose is to encourage fellows to think about what kind of ideologies these practices produce and how they construct

“femininity” and “empowerment.” The program also seeks to facilitate how to work with institutions, how to change policies, attract funding for programs, and disseminate information about their activities. Just as GEST fellows are encouraged to think about the structural conditions that shape everyday realities, there is also a discussion on how to work within those conditions to bring about real societal changes.

5. Conclusions

The GEST program offers ways to think and practice feminism. In temporal and material terms, it matters to have the time and location to share experiences from different backgrounds that might be of value in the participants’ own contexts. Transnational feminist theorizing places particular local experiences in a global context; it accentuates the inter-relationships between particular parts of the world and forms of inequality and fosters stronger responsibilities. Thus, the GEST program may also create new configurations since collaborations, networks, and solidarities are forged within program which are, then, sustained beyond the classroom through the research program and a transnational forum of alumni.

It is also notable that GEST articulates the deployment of resources, often reserved for those already privileged in the global North, for the development and strengthening of global Southern expertise. Every effort is made to avoid this devolving into normative relations of patronage that characterize global Northern engagements with the Global South. The epistemological and methodological frameworks of the program, which disrupt didactic pedagogies and stress the value of encompassing broad knowledge serve to open up an ethics of care and responsibility of shared implicatedness and responsibility.

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