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Gender Studies Conference in Finland Went Global in 2019

We, at the Gender Studies disciplinary unit at the University of Helsinki, were honored to organize last Gender Studies 2019 conference *On Violence* in Helsinki, Finland. This conference was organized in collaboration with two ongoing projects; *Incorporating Vulnerability* lead by University Lecturer and Adjunct Professor Elina Penttinen, and *WeAll Finland* lead by Associate Professor Marjut Jyrkinen. The annual gender studies events always differ one from another because they reflect the research interests and agenda of the institution where the event is located. Our intention was to build a truly diverse and international event and reached for a global audience.¹

We created our call for workshops and call for papers intentionally so that it would speak to scholars also in the Global South as we believed that addressing the question of gender and violence cannot be tackled by Finnish, Nordic or European scholars alone. We believed that Helsinki could also be an attractive place for delegates from all over the world to engage in the discussion on gender and violence. Therefore, in deciding the theme of the conference we wanted to take advantage of our location as well. Our conference team advertised the event globally to ensure that the information reached scholars from diverse locations and diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Our conference call asked the following questions: What is violence? How is violence normalized in some contexts? How do gender, sexuality, race, and class, among other axes of power, intersect making some bodies more prone to experiencing violence? How to subvert and challenge different forms of violence, and what are the respectful and nuanced forms of solidarity and activism that take the specificity of people's experiences into consideration?

Going global was for us a question of aiming for inclusivity and diversity. As our own Gender Studies unit is an international group of doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, organizing an international conference was a natural choice for us and reflective of the shared values and ethos in our own disciplinary unit. We strongly believe that gender studies community in Finland and in the Nordic countries benefits from opening up to the South and East. Emphasis on Finnish as the main language, as is the case often in the annual gender studies conferences, can be a form of exclusion: paradoxically, local language politics may debar voices and experiences which are relevant for understanding the roots, processes and everyday practices of multifarious and global gendered violence and violations. For us Finnish researchers it is important to engage in international academic community and communicate our own research internationally.

We were amazed by the success of our conference in reaching our goal for international participants. We had over 400 participants from 45 countries from different continents. Many of the participants took part in a Gender Studies conference for the first time and had never before visited Finland. The delegates represented diverse countries such as Russia, Turkey,

¹ The collaborating project *Incorporating Vulnerability Project* is funded by University of Helsinki Three Year Grants, and *WeAll project* (Social and Economic Sustainability of Future Working Life) is funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland (No 292883).

Mexico, Peru, India, Pakistan, Mongolia, South Korea, Ghana and Egypt to name a few places from where scholars seldom participate in Nordic Gender Studies events.

Conference events

Over 50 working groups talked intensively during the conference days. Almost every aspect, level and nuance of gender and violence were addressed and discussed as the conference programme and book of abstracts revealed². These included the questions of race and gender, vulnerable groups, different institutional contexts such as schools and workplaces, violences in the intimate relationships, and many other topical areas ranging from violence in different geographical contexts to queer approaches to study violations. In addition research methodologies and practical applications were discussed during the conference. The workshops represented a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds making the event truly multi- and interdisciplinary conference which we had set out to create.

The conference included two pre-conference events. One was organized by Center for University Teaching and Learning at University of Helsinki and was directed to two groups, namely early career researchers and doctoral supervisors. The focus was on overcoming common challenges in the process of pursuing a doctoral degree as well best practices for supervisors to support doctoral students. Another pre-conference event, titled Beyond Violence, was organized by the main organizer Elina Penttinen. This event brought together scholars researching gender and violence by using innovative approaches and methodologies. The focus of the workshop was to develop multidisciplinary research collaboration based on shared understanding of the conjunction of gender and violence and combine this with the intention of seeking sustainable solutions that recognize agency of survivors.

The actual conference was opened by President Tarja Halonen, who is also the chairperson of the University of Helsinki. In her opening speech, President Halonen highlighted how violence, gender, poverty, sustainability and crisis are interlinked. She argued how these questions should not be tackled only separately, and emphasized the relevance of including women and minorities in peace-building processes. She has an eminent career and is well known throughout the world. She has, for example, been the vice-chair in process of creating the United Nations' sustainable development goals. President Halonen has been throughout her career a promoter, innovator and supporter of human rights and has been active in designing many gender equality and non-discrimination acts and actions. Her presence in the opening ceremony set the tone for creating a conversation which addresses questions of violence straight on and which recognizes how to take seriously the position of the most vulnerable groups in global conflicts.

One of the conference highlights was the timely and topical open floor panel discussion on climate change and violence, which was organized by research assistants and conference secretaries Kerttu Willamo and Aino Hiltunen. The discussion brought up the various links between the current environmental crisis and multiple forms of violence. The panel included four speakers representing different viewpoints ranging from academia to activism. The panelists were Petra Laiti, chairperson of Suoma Sámi Nuorat rs (a non-governmental Sámi youth organization), Violeta Gutiérrez Zamora, doctoral researcher from the University of Eastern Finland, Sari Rautio, director of the unit for security policy and crisis management at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and Dr. Kadri Aavik, researcher from Gender Studies, University of Helsinki. The discussion was moderated by Sonja Nielsen, who is an

² The conference program and book of abstracts are available at: <https://www.helsinki.fi/fi/konferenssit/gender-studies-2019-conference>

activist in Ilmastoveivi2019 and Climate Move -movements. Many interesting arguments were underlined, such as the importance of recognizing the impacts of colonialism embedded in climate change, and the violent effects on non-humans, i.e. animals and species. The panelists also highlighted the various unrecognized and hidden forms of violence connected to climate change, and emphasized the importance of an intersectional approach. The panel was streamed online, and it has gained over 450 views since the event³.

Keynote speeches

This year's conference theme was chosen because we believe that the questions of violence and violations are crucial locally and globally. The three invited keynote speakers also reflected this as they addressed the questions of gender, violence and vulnerabilities also in terms of how to fight injustices, recognize the long term effects of direct and indirect violence and build better futures. Often the relevance of gender in many forms of violence and violations is not understood, although the processes may be strongly interlinked with gendered practices and processes that enable and foster violence. Even though violence is not always researched directly as such, it is still something which is configured in the interests in Gender Studies and close disciplines. In feminist research we have been active in creating new understanding on how violence is embedded in culture and society, and how it operates in relation to systems of power and how these are reiterated and maintained. Our keynote speakers addressed these questions from their own research expertise areas:

Associate Professor, Swati Parashar, from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, brought up the wide context of violence and violations that result from the colonial histories. Parashar focused on the visual, discursive and ethical exclusions and inclusions of political violence, and how these are significantly gendered. Parashar illustrated how some kinds of suffering and some forms of violence are the subjects of media coverage and public discourse, while others are rendered ordinary and not sensationalized.

Our second key-note speaker, Associate Professor, Sima Shakshari, University of Minnesota, USA, discussed how the politics of death are intertwined with the politics of democratization under the rhetoric of rights. Shakshari explored how notions of sexual rights are used by liberalizing projects, which sanction violence under the rhetoric of democratization. Shakshari argued how some populations are represented as "risky", simultaneously as victims in need of protection and containing the risk of "terrorism", and how their live a loaned life, contingent on the benevolence of the liberalizing regimes.

The third key-note speaker, Associate Professor Kathy Sanderson, Lakehead University, Canada closed the series of keynotes bringing up an aspect of violence which can be familiar to many in academic workplaces. We want to highlight Sanderson's keynote lecture here because it resonates with the organizers' ongoing research interests on emotional workplace abuse, which is still little researched area in feminist research on violence. Sanderson is also a trained psychotherapist and has worked with women who have been targets of intimate partner violence. We felt it was important to include practice-informed perspective to the discussion on violence so that we can discuss experiences of violence in ethically sustainable ways. Additionally, we wanted to open the discussion on recognizing the effects of emotionally abusive workplaces also within academic contexts.

³ <https://www.helsinki.fi/fi/unitube/video/5e828ca2-98e1-427a-801c-0e34be1ca100>

Sanderson addressed the relevance of taking seriously emotionally abusive behaviors and practices in the workplace and showed how these, often subtle and insidious practices are deeply traumatizing for the target similarly as long term intimate partner violence (IPV) is. She expressed in her talk that perhaps for someone who had an ongoing process of emotional abuse at work the keynote session might not be the session for them to attend as it may trigger trauma. We, as organizers, believe that it is important to be mindful about the possibility that also within academic conferences there can be people in the audience who have direct experiences of violence and also that non-physical forms of violence can be deeply traumatizing similarly as physical violence.

Sanderson movingly showed during her talk the effects of ostracism and other emotionally abusive behaviors and practices had on the targets. Through various examples she discussed how these had concretized in the targets' lives, leaving the targets feeling helpless, living in constant fear and hypervigilance and trying to cope with the various physical and psychological symptoms of traumatic stress. Sanderson explained that based on her research the similarities between workplace and IPV included practices of coercive control, various threats to the target as well as devaluing the target in front of others. She discussed how the participants in her research tried to cope with the situation by, for example, working even harder to win approval of the perpetrator or by isolating themselves and accepting the abuse as part of life. What is relevant to note was that abusive behaviors were normalized in these workplaces and the blame for the abuse was projected onto the target. Thus, the target was made to feel as if they had caused the abuse that they had been subjected to. Sanderson explained how by-standers at work may have also wanted to distance themselves from the target in order to avoid becoming the next target. Similarly, as it is difficult to leave the abusive relationships it is difficult to leave an abusive workplace for economic reasons.

One key element of emotional abuse at the workplace – which is the theme of our own research – is that it breaks personal and professional boundaries. For this reason it may be difficult for targets of abuse to discern that abusive behavior is actually abuse, and instead rationalize it as a matter of clashing personalities or behavior resulting from workplace stress. Moreover, these inappropriate behaviors may be enabled by a late-modern workplace culture which does not respect the boundaries between personal and professional lives and expects employees to give their all to the workplace – and even to tolerate inappropriate behavior in order to show to be a dedicated employee and loyal to the organization.

We want to put forward the idea of rethinking how we can foster respect for professional and personal boundaries within the academia in Finland and especially among scholars affiliated closely with the discipline of gender studies. This is relevant in terms of what kind of organizational culture we want to pass on to the next generations of scholars, meaning our master and doctoral students. Can we show a practice of academic discussion and scholarship that values personal integrity, allows for difference of opinion and is inclusive of scholars from various national and scholarly backgrounds?

After the conference

In creating a global scholarly event, we wanted do this professionally. Thus, we also gathered conference feedback by sending a feedback form to all the registered participants. 75% of 107 respondents had participated for the first time in Gender Studies conference in Finland. We were pleased that 91,6 % would be interested in attending another event organized by Gender Studies at University of Helsinki. More than 82% of the respondents were also either satisfied or very with the conference arrangements. In the open conference feedback we also received

much praise for the organization and multidisciplinary content of the conference and the workshops. Especially the helpfulness of the student volunteers was much appreciated by our international conference participants.

In personal conversations, especially with attendees from the Global South, we received much appreciation for the diversity of our keynote speakers, the event and especially the workshops that addressed issues of race. Therefore, we were happy that we achieved our goal of creating a forum in which scholars from Global South and North could engage in exchanging ideas and thus also enrich the Finnish gender studies community.

All in all, we want to thank all the participants for lively discussions, interesting presentations and full-hearted and active presence in the conference. We wish all the best for your research and hope to see you again in Helsinki! Our best wishes also to the next Finnish but also other Gender Studies conferences.

Acknowledgements:

We wish to thank our wonderful conference team members: Ada Schwanck who was part of the main organizing team from the beginning; doctoral student Suzy Ameen for writing the conference theme and call for workshops so that it truly spoke to scholars globally; Anna Heinonen for designing the media plan and actively distributing information about the conference on wide networks and email lists; Aiko Lohtander for editing the conference App and Annukka Paajanen for coordinating volunteers. We were also grateful that the City of Helsinki offered to host a reception for the conference. The vice-Mayor Pia Pakarinen welcomed the international and national guests and introduced a short history of the City of Helsinki. Last but not least, we want to thank the student volunteers for their important input and wonderful collaboration with the team.

References:

Penttinen, E., Jyrkinen, M. & Wide, E. (2019) Emotional Workplace Abuse: A New Research Approach. Palgrave Macmillan.

YTT, dosentti Elina Penttinen toimii yliopistonlehtorina ja Sukupuolentutkimuksen maisteriohjelman johtajana Helsingin yliopistossa. Penttisen tutkimus keskittyy laajasti feministisen väkivallan tutkimuksen alueelle ja hän on tutkimuksessaan käsitellyt ihmiskauppaa, kriisinhallintaa sekä sodan kokemusta feministisen kansainvälisen politiikan näkökulmasta. Tällä hetkellä Penttisen tutkimus keskittyy henkisen väkivallan kokemukseen lähisuhteissa ja työelämässä.

FT, dosentti Marjut Jyrkinen toimii työelämän tasa-arvon tutkimuksen ja sukupuolentutkimuksen apulaisprofessorina Helsingin yliopistossa ja WeAll-hankkeen (weallfinland.fi) konsortiojohtajana. Jyrkisen tutkimus kiinnittyy sukupuolen, johtamisen ja organisaatioiden alueelle, ja hän on tutkinut johtajanaisten urakehitystä, sukupuolistunutta ikäsyryntää ja väkivaltaa ja risteävien erojen merkityksiä yhteiskunnassa ja työelämässä.

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