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Care as symbolic exile: The diversity work of Slovak gender studies scholars

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Abstract

In recent years, science has become a battlefield where the lines of the gendered world order are being negotiated. This negotiation cannot be understood without examining the epistemic communities of gender studies – their members, practices, conditions, and the power relations within which they operate. This study aims to enrich the research on gender and feminist scholarship from the perspective of a country with a weak degree of institutionalisation of gender studies. It focuses on the experiences of PhD candidates and early career scholars of social sciences in Slovakia, as narrated in two focus group discussions. We argue that the combination of fragmentation in gender-oriented epistemic communities and the competitiveness of neoliberalised academia pushes junior gender studies scholars to experience isolation, a self-imposed or forced symbolic exile within their institutions and academic communities. However, while the symbolic exile is a space of exclusion, it also is a space of care – for and about oneself, for and about others, for and about one's institution. The study conceptualises these practices of care as 'diversity work' and examines them as both initiatives of individual scholars and invisible everyday labour that maintains the presence of gender-oriented scholarship in an academic environment marked by limited institutionalisation of gender studies.

Keywords: gender studies; diversity work; care; PhD studies; early career researchers

1 Introduction

A decade-long process of translating political and social conflicts in terms of morality (Vargovčíková, 2021) has been manifested in Slovakia mostly as the anti-gender opposition to the National Strategy for Human Rights Protection and Promotion in 2014; the referendum against non-heterosexual families in 2015; mass mobilisation against the Istanbul Convention; and efforts to limit access to abortion (Maďarová & Valkovičová, 2021). Unlike in neighbouring countries, gender studies (GS) scholars and scholarship in Slovakia have been scarcely targeted by anti-gender politics, which to a certain extent can be explained by the weak institutionalisation of GS and the few scholars' limited public visibility. As elsewhere, GS institutionalisation in Slovak academic epistemic communities has been primarily forged

as individualised institutionalisation (Pereira, 2017), prompted by the endeavours of individual academics in their departments. Moreover, gender knowledge in academia is often produced and shared by non-academics primarily working in civil society and public administration. With just one BA program in gender studies in the country, this all means a rather fleeting presence of GS in Slovak social sciences or humanities, leaving those who wish to study this particular field or train to become a GS scholar with many uncertainties.

If we understand epistemic communities as the key subjects of knowledge production (Szapuová, 2009), then fragmentation of gender epistemic communities, limited cooperation and knowledge-sharing between their members, and individualisation of research and teaching practices posit a serious challenge for the production and development of gender and feminist knowledge in times when anti-gender discourse is taking root in academic institutions. Science has become a battlefield where the lines of the gendered world order are being negotiated (Pető, 2021). The process of this negotiation cannot be understood without getting to know the academic epistemic communities – their members, practices, conditions, and the power relations within which they operate.

In this study, we aim to add to the existing research on gender and feminist scholarship from the perspective of a country with a weak degree of institutionalisation of GS and where individualised carriers of gender knowledge operate from a place of – self-imposed or times forced – symbolic exile. This experience is characterised by deliberate expulsion and self-isolation from academic cooperation and mistrust towards/from the academic community, leading scholars to seek support systems elsewhere and causing lack of continuity in knowledge production. Besides working at 'the periphery of the established order' (Barbour, 2007, p. 295), the GS scholars often experience a nomadic academic life, as they are constantly moving between short-term contracts in academia or between jobs in academia and other spheres. In parallel to political exile, this symbolic exile in academia is marked by the experience of decentralisation, constant moving, and being at the margins, which leads to a need for creating one's own structures of meaning (Barbour, 2007). So while we do not mean to downplay the political threat and material suffering of those who have been displaced and exiled, we find it meaningful and analytically useful to understand economic precarisation and political oppression as 'two sides of the same coin, although their proportions vary depending on the coordinates of a given region within the world-economy' (Vatansever & Kolemen, 2020, p. 2). In focus group discussions with junior GS scholars, feelings of isolation and mistrust emerged in relation to their efforts to navigate the structures of a neoliberalising academia and their interactions with colleagues who either lack interest in or are openly hostile towards gender studies. We also found synergies with a recent study among GS PhD candidates across Europe (Boulila, Cheung & Lehotai, 2019) that highlights their struggles, which primarily concern the issue of epistemic challenges experienced by GS scholars, as well as concerns over financial stability and job opportunities. It seems that while encountering an uneven distribution of epistemic authority toward GS (Pereira, 2014), these scholars also struggle with shrinking institutional budgets, precarious working contracts, and attempts at academic (performative) excellence (Verdera, 2019) while still in training.

Against this background, the emerging scholars in our research – PhD candidates (PhDCs) and early career researchers (ECRs) in social sciences – described their academic praxis in terms of care. Therefore, we approach these scholars as engaged in, and bound by relations of care in academic institutions (Verdera, 2019; Jesenková, 2021): they care for and about themselves; they are (potentially) being cared about; they care for and about social

justice; for and about students; as well as for and about their academic institutions. The present study looks at the experiences of these scholars as diversity workers and 'killjoys' (Ahmed, 2012; 2016), while it reinforces the observation that institutional diversity work is complex, contextual and ambivalent (Ahmed & Swan, 2006).

It has been argued that, to have truly 'caring universities', caring must be equally distributed within the institution (Noddings, 2002). However, what our communication partners mostly spoke about were individualised instances of 'working on an institution' (Ahmed, 2017), while the support of that institution is missing. Resisting the current imperatives of academic productivity (Pereira, 2020) is inherently connected with the experience of solitude. Thus, we argue that the practices of care in academia reinforce the double character of symbolic exile: they can offer flight from the competitiveness of neoliberal academia (Taylor & Lahad, 2018); however, such temporary freedom comes at the cost of exclusion from the academic community, and for junior scholars also at the potential cost of career growth.

2 Faces of neoliberalism in Central and Eastern European higher education

This study is informed by two sets of literature – the one dealing with institutionalisation of gender studies and another one on neoliberalisation of academia. Here we understand neoliberalisation as a process leading to the introduction and acceptance of the logic and practices of the market regime expansion, focus on outputs and emphasis on individualism and competitiveness (Kahlert, 2018, p. 1). In this process, knowledge is being transformed 'into an engine of economy, where researchers figure as individualised units of production. The idea that research output must be under the constant surveillance of assessment procedures in order to ensure stable and continued productivity emerged within this framework' (Linková & Vohlídalová, 2017, p. 13).

In post-state socialist countries, the neoliberalisation of higher education or the turn to academic capitalism has been part of broader socioeconomic transformations after the 1990s. The focus on thin state and individualism seemed like a clear alternative to the state socialist past and a means to 'catch up' with the West (Aavik & Marling, 2018; Kobová, 2009). The climate of transformation – including educational transformation – after the 1990s significantly benefited gender studies in post-state socialist countries (Zimmermann, 2007). Substantial part of the financial resources coming from abroad to support democratisation went to the field of gender studies, partly due to the efforts of individuals at academia and civil society who aimed to open a space for gender research and teaching in conservative institutions and societies (Cerwonka, 2009). 'In many countries of the former Soviet Union, the institutionalisation of gender studies has been trapped in a not always happy alliance with the often contested westernisation of the education system and its simultaneous reform in the direction of the 'entrepreneurial university.' The same is true, in other ways, for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which are increasingly bound up in the process of EU-ization of higher education policy.' (Zimmermann, 2007, p. 160). As Zimmermann (2007, p. 160) concludes, this contributes to geographical inequality in and beyond Europe but also has a potential of 'combining gender critique and social critique of the past and present of Central and Eastern Europe and the post–Soviet space in the larger world.' This link between westernisation (and neoliberalisation) and development of gender studies in post-state

socialist countries have been feeding the 'anti-gender movements' or 'gender ideology discourse' in Central and Eastern Europe (Gregor, 2022) in the last decade, with the most visible attacks on gender studies and academic freedom observed in Hungary and Romania (Kállay & Valkovičová, 2020). However, gender studies scholars also experience the implications of continuously neoliberalised academic environment and look for different ways to resist not only new forms of governance in universities and research institutions but also their conservative and sometimes even hostile environments. It is the experience of GS scholars what is at the focus of this paper which seeks to contribute to what is known as critical university studies (e.g. Kahlert, 2018) and enrich the perspective coming from Central and Eastern Europe, especially from a country with weak institutionalisation of gender studies.

3 Individualised institutionalisation of gender studies in Slovakia

Slovakia counts among the countries where 'gender ideology' rhetoric has been mainstreamed by political elites and has played a significant role in various forms of opposition to gender equality and LGBTI rights policies, or in practices of dismantling participatory mechanisms of policy making (Maďarová & Valkovičová, 2021). However, anti-gender politics have been rarely used to attack GS scholars, as we have seen elsewhere. While scholars in other countries have been targeted by attacks upon 'dangerous and elitist academics' in various processes of contestation (Taylor & Lahad, 2018), Slovak scholars were primarily threatened by political elites and activists in the period from 2014 to 2015. The first instance was in June 2014, in the context of celebrating International Children's Day, when a group of medical practitioners led by a psychiatrist and former member of parliament, Alojz Rakús, initiated an open letter 'against gender-sensitive education', calling for the government 'to adopt particular measures which will prevent the entry of gender ideology into the educational process' (Klub kresťanských lekárov…, 2014). The second instance was during the 2015 campaign for the referendum against non-heterosexual families, during which many activists and some scholars publicly spoke against the referendum (Valkovičová & Hardoš, 2018). As Sekerák (2020) emphasises, the practice of directly attacking GS scholarship has been observed in Slovakia mainly among a few neo-conservative actors and religious leaders, while 'gender ideology' rhetoric has also been present within some higher education institutions of primarily Catholic devotion over the past half a decade.

The choice of different targets by anti-gender actors can be partially explained by the way gender studies has struggled to root itself in the education system and research. As Allaine Cerwonka (2009, p. 86) writes,

> [G]ender studies in CEE developed in ways similar to other regions and countries. Certain scholars took on additional work to train themselves. They created a community for gender studies with other interested scholars and students in the form of reading groups, conferences and other activities. They battled university administrators and state governments to introduce gender to the existing curriculum.

It was within this regional movement, and with the significant support of civil society (Wöhrer, 2016), that the first and only Centre for Gender Studies was established in 2001 in the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava. However, the development of GS in CEE countries differed, and even though the process of institutionalisation of GS is complex

and stripped of any notion of linearity (Pereira, 2017), it is fair to say that, compared to neighbouring countries, Slovak scholars have had limited success with creating GS centres and study modules. So far, the only study module for bachelor's degree students, *Gender Studies and Culture*, was established in 2013 in humanities at the University of Pavol Jozef Šafárik in Košice. This means that GS studies scholarship is mostly reproduced and shared in the form of individual courses, or topics within different courses. While the question of autonomy vs. integration (Hemmings, 2005) of GS in academia has been ongoing, both globally and in Slovakia, the pragmatic reasons have led mostly to mainstreaming gender knowledge into existing Slovak disciplinary structures. This is generally the result of what Pereira (2017) terms individualised institutionalisation, whereby it is usually an assertive individual who campaigns and dedicates their time (often merely in the form of an elective course) in order to teach or supervise a GS thesis. The concept of individualised institutionalisation thus prompts us to pay attention to the current conditions regulating work and life in academia, which is particularly salient with regards to aspiring scholars – PhD candidates and early career researchers.

4 The Slovakian version of doing gender studies at entrepreneurial universities

Besides the character of GS institutionalisation, the process of neoliberalisation of academia is another significant factor that has been shaping the 'ongoing struggles over the definition of, and the power to define, what can count as "proper" knowledge, and should therefore be accepted, funded or certified as such' (Pereira, 2017, p. 2).

Discussion in 2021–22 centres around the proposed higher education reform, as well as de/centralisation and politicisation of universities. On the one hand, university authorities warn against measures that would allow political loyalists to take over higher education institutions; on the other hand, those supporting reforms call for better quality education and levelling up to the 'Western standards'. Previously, Slovak media uncovered cases of academic plagiarism among political elites and some high-ranking scholars, or instances of whole departments publishing in predatory journals. While the need for change and better quality is difficult to oppose, the same arguments are often used to cut institutional budgets and introduce precarious working conditions. According to Kobová (2009), the early 2000s witnessed significant changes in higher education in Slovakia: an increase in the number of students along with cuts in the state budget for universities. These changes were prompted by the growing pressure to improve 'competitiveness' and based on the logic of 'catching up with the West'. The developments highlighted by Kobová can be understood as part of the neoliberalisation of Slovak higher education, as they aim to build up a knowledge society, which requires change in priorities and standards in academia (Nyklová & Fárová, 2018).

Kobová (2009) subsumes these changes into a broader term of 'academic capitalism', which signifies the transformation of universities into complex economic and political institutions – she also claims that these institutions must self-govern based on criteria of autonomy, efficacy and competitiveness. Other scholars also speak of the introduction of auditing within various aspects of public life (Ahmed, 2012), including higher education, whereby managerial tools, ranking and evaluations, measurements of scientific excellence, and tools of marketing are introduced (Kahlert 2018). As Pereira (2020, p. 502) argues, in view of the COVID-19

pandemic, such rationality of productivity in academia has been known to emphasise publications in indexed journals as measurements of excellence but have been deliberately oblivious to other dimensions of academic work, such as teaching and supervision, mentoring, event organisation, trade union work, or equality and diversity work, as well as other forms of collegial work.

In the sense of the 'culture of performativity', the importance of citations and impact factors grows, as well as the emphasis on an atomised, competitive individual (Verdera, 2019). Universities and individuals have to become competitive, and so too must GS scholars prove that they are profitable (Pereira, 2017). Academic structures based on these principles happen to be precarious to some more than others. This in particular pertains to junior scholars who navigate their teaching and research at universities, striving for every student and competing for grants in order to fill their basic needs. In terms of PhD studies, countries such as Slovakia or Czechia do not have stable rules on how much work and what kind of work they should be doing. For many, this means not only teaching and researching, but also admin work, although these demands can differ by department (Cidlinská & Vohlídalová, 2015). After graduating, junior scholars often find themselves in situations where they are employed on short-term post-doc contracts with salaries that provide significantly less money than they received with their PhD scholarships (Vohlídalová, 2021).

Similar claims were made by Boulila, Cheung and Lehotai (2019), who collected accounts of GS PhD candidates and early career researchers across Europe. While the major concern expressed was the epistemic challenge of being a GS scholar, half of them worried about employment and financial issues. The latter, however, is not experienced only in the field of GS. In the same vein, former scholars of various fields in neighbouring Czechia claimed that the most common reasons for them leaving academia were existential uncertainty, the fact that work was time consuming and stressful, burnout, the employer ending their contract, or bad relationships in their department (Cidlinská & Vohlídalová, 2015). Such conditions are known to many PhD candidates and ECRs in Slovakia, where the recently announced plan of governmental budget cuts for universities threatens the institutions' ability to pay their growing electricity bills (TASR, 2022). What seems specific to GS junior scholars is the experience of neoliberal precarisation reinforced by a fragmented and individualised gender-oriented epistemic community.

5 Studying emerging gender studies scholars: Diversity work as care

The present study was conducted within a research project framework dedicated to the institutionalisation of GS in Slovak social sciences. Our initial objective was, among others, to enquire about early career scholars' reflections on the field's epistemic legitimacy, their experiences with 'gender ideology' rhetoric, and their working and studying conditions within academia.

Since there are no established study modules for GS within social sciences, we set out to contact senior scholars and ask them to identify potential research participants; we also approached our extended GS networks and used the snowball method to gain contacts. We sought three types of communication partners: PhD candidates; individuals who obtained their PhD degree in the past three years; and individuals who abandoned PhD studies within

the same timeframe. All three groups should have been dealing with gender perspectives in their thesis, research, or lecturing. We managed to draw up a list of fourteen possible communication partners fitting these three profiles, and we contacted them all with a call for remunerated participation in group sessions for current and past PhD candidates in GS. By emphasising the label of a GS scholar, we also aimed for self-selection of individuals who subscribe to this label. Eventually, seven of the fourteen agreed to online group sessions, all of whom were either students at the time or had successfully finished within the past three years. These communication partners were then invited to two online focus groups organised in September and October of 2021. The recordings of the sessions added up to 4 hours and 10 minutes and were then transcribed verbatim.

In the course of two focus group discussions, we soon realised that discussions turned to topics and reflections that we did not originally foresee. Their narration seemed to steer away from broader discussions of academic working conditions and focused rather on institutional culture and their personal struggles and successes as GS scholars in their departments. Our communication partners spoke extensively about their experiences, from finding a thesis supervisor, to managing expectations, teaching GS, and struggling with change within their own academic institutions.

The stories we heard became an invitation for us to apply a feminist ear as a research method (Ahmed, 2021, p. 8). We tried to listen to the experiences as well as the silences, and to take seriously what often can be dismissed as an unreasonable complaint made by those who are too demanding and too inexperienced. In order to make sense of the reflections of our communication partners, we approach the work of GS scholars as diversity work (Ahmed & Swan, 2006; Ahmed, 2017). We further recognise that it is common for GS scholars to identify as feminist scholars, which means adhering to feminist ethics in teaching and researching. This means: 'being critical of social and political life, or drawing on injustices created by norms or practices' (Ackerly & True, 2010, p. 1), thus being reflexive about unequal power relations and social injustices, including in one's own work (Mackay, 2020). GS scholars or feminist scholars can thus engage in institutional diversity work, which Ahmed (2017, p. 91) describes as '[the] work we do when we are attempting to transform institutions (open them up for those who have been excluded), and second, the work we do when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution'. While Ahmed develops her concept from the experience of employees charged with equality and diversity policies at universities, she further explains that GS scholars can also engage in attempts at rebuilding institutions – making them more accessible to those who are marginalised and excluded (Ahmed, 2017, p. 109). They may experience situations where they do not inhabit the norms of an institution; even their 'bodies can become a question mark' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 115). A diversity worker can find themselves in a position of a 'killjoy', a person who interrupts the scripts of happiness and progress in one's own institution – and pointing to a problem can mean becoming one (Ahmed, 2017; Murray, 2018). That is why diversity workers find themselves engaging in image or body management, as well as emotional labour, that is, 'labour that requires to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild, 2012, p. 7).

In this manner, diversity work can also be understood as a set of caring practices in the sense of a feminist ethics of care. From this perspective, care is an essential activity present in public life, including in the educational process (Kittay, 1999; Noddings, 2002). As Verdera (2019, p. 86) claims in relation to higher education: 'teaching [is a] fundamentally relational

form of work, [and it] includes a deeply implicit care dimension that can surface through the learning-teaching relationship'. According to Verdera, what goes hand-in-hand with teaching as a care practice is the reconsideration of epistemologies and methodologies of researching, teaching, and evaluating (Verdera, 2019). In the same vein, Jesenková speaks of universities, which 'can be seen from the perspective of care ethics as one means of taking care of us and our environment, our world, so that we can live happy and productive lives within it' (Jesenková, 2021, p. 63). For Jesenková, caring for a university means caring for its community in a broader perspective.

In the following study, we aim to present the experience of GS early career scholars in an environment marked by weak institutionalisation of the field, a fragmented and individualised gender-oriented epistemic community, and pressure to achieve 'academic excellence'. The described analytical framework allows us to place these scholars within a map of care in academia: by engaging in diversity work, PhDCs and ECRs enact caring practices within their own institutions, but as they are in the position of employees and students, they are also on the receiving end of care. This complex care map is outlined by five types of caring practices as identified in the focus group discussion: being cared for; caring for oneself; caring for social justice; caring for students, and caring for (one's academic) institution. While in the following sections we dedicate separate attention to each of these practices, it is evident that the discussed themes overlap.

The results of the focus group sessions of 2021 map onto our thematic analysis conducted using MaxQDA software. The analysis was conducted based on the approach of inductive 'data-driven coding' advocated by Boyatzis (1998). Our approach consisted of three stages: 1) sampling, which focused on the two transcribed discussions; 2) development of (primarily descriptive) codes, which consisted of the reduction of raw data, identifying themes among speakers of both groups, and comparing them; this second stage led us to establishing a coding scheme with nine coding families and altogether forty-nine codes; 3) validation of codes and their application to the whole sample. The thematic analysis was possible thanks to the approach of 'clustering themes' (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 136) with the aid of MaxQDA code queries and code matrix tools (i.e., code co-occurrence and code co-presence). This allowed us to establish five above-mentioned meta-themes of caring practices of our communication partners. All quotes were anonymised, not only in terms of speakers' names, but also in terms of details that would allow the speakers to be identified.

5.1 Being cared for

We set out to ask our communication partners about their experience of establishing a thesis topic and finding or being assigned a thesis supervisor. Supervisors were discussed continuously throughout the debates as key figures – 'door openers' – and often as the main support system. However, these aspects were also brought out as something that PhDCs and ECRs lacked. Most of them spoke about the initial struggle of finding someone who would be knowledgeable on their chosen thesis topic. Some were initially assigned a supervisor who lacked interest in GS, was openly ignorant towards GS, or was even biased towards women and feminists. Therefore, besides already working on their PhD research, participants needed to deal with the process of changing this potentially key figure of their study. While Daniela, Petra, and Natália succeeded in changing their supervisors, Barbora (PhDC) was not so

successful and blamed the inflexibility of the institutional structures and the lack of institutional resources: 'Actually, I have been trying to change my supervisor for two years, but nobody has listened to me and nobody has given me that option'.

In the case of a positive experience, the supervisor is a person who cares about and cares for their students. While some, such as Emma, relied heavily on their supervisor's GS expertise and even friendship, it was also very common for our communication partners to associate positive cooperation with 'lack of interference' with one's work (see Figure 1): 'On the one hand, that was the downside, that nobody helped me; on the other hand, that was the upside, that I was my own boss, and I did not have to quarrel with anyone' (Natália, ECR).

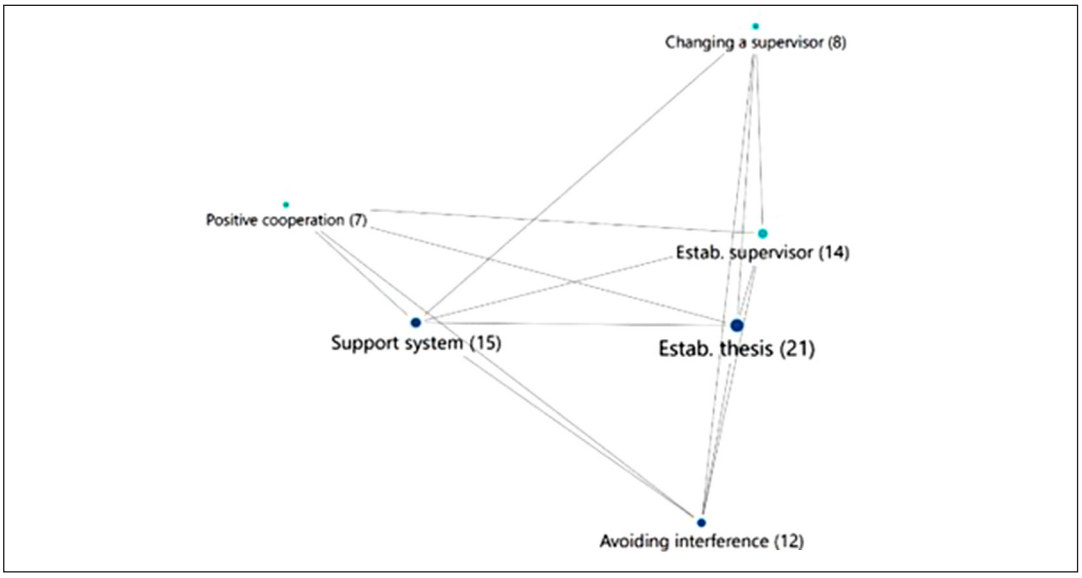

Figure 1 Experience with supervisors – avoiding interference (code co-occurrence)

The small number of GS scholars nation-wide is reflected in their limited presence at Slovak higher education institutions. In this sense, many PhDCs and ECRs consider themselves lucky not just when they have a supervisor who is a GS expert, but also when the supervisor does not simply negatively interfere with their academic work. This implication of the limited institutionalisation of GS adds to more general problems related to the overall situation in Slovak academia discussed by our communication partners, such as limited provision of training in their PhD programs (e.g. training on how to do research or publish), or even lack of material resources (e.g. computers).

5.2 Caring for oneself

Our communication partners discussed many instances in which they experienced bias or hostility towards them as women and feminists, or ignorance towards GS within their epistemic communities. For example, after raising an issue with a plagiarised student assignment, Daniela's senior female colleague accused her of being biased towards the student, since he was a man. Within their own departments, many experienced visibility as GS

scholars, which was not always welcome. Erika (ECR) is a person who tends to deliberately engage in 'educating her colleagues' on issues of gender or sexuality, but she also experiences unwelcome confrontation: 'I do not consider this to be a downside, I rather consider this to be strenuous – sometimes I just want to have potatoes and salad [in the school's canteen] and not deal with women in the Israeli army, but this also happens to me in my private life, so I am used to it'. Barbora, Laura and Emma even spoke about instances where they assessed the situation and chose not to be a killjoy, or to 'tone it down', in order to succeed in institutional passing (Ahmed, 2017): '[W]hen it comes to the management, they would not accept any other opinion. So there, I did not push for it, neither did I consider it to be necessary' (Emma, ECR).

As Murray (2018, p. 173) writes on this issue: 'There are moments when the feminist can decide not to be a killjoy, and instead to go along with things, to keep the peace. However, some killjoys cannot choose their moments because their very existence is a challenge in that space or they have challenged so much already that their reputation precedes them'. Thus, many happen to be robbed of their possibility to self-care and avoid engaging in discussions that can be personal and hurtful. Barbora (PhDC) had a similar experience: 'I felt the discrimination at the faculty, whether it was me not fulfilling some norms of femininity, or hints at the topic of sexuality, which I focus on […]. Which I consider completely inadequate to ask such questions, because when someone researches a topic, that does not mean they have any inner connection to [it]'.

What is more, they also described extensively the struggles of teaching GS. When talking about their teaching experience, they mostly spoke about this practice as 'having discussions with students' or as 'challenging norms and attitudes' of their students. Teaching for many entailed discussions on marginalised identities or oppression, which makes their work especially personal. Being GS lecturers also seems to go hand-in-hand with encountering the sexism and racism of students, which results in feelings of anger and frustration (see Table 1). As Scharrón-Del Río (2020, p. 299) confirms, educators who deal with topics of systemic oppression can face student resistance and engage in 'draining' conversations, 'as students often target the educator to discharge their discomfort through privileged resistance […] for the educator with multiple marginalised identities, the emotional intensity of teaching an anti-oppressive curriculum is exponentially increased. The personal is political'. Early career scholars are already aware of these risks and the need to manage their emotions or emotional displays. As Petra (PhDC) admits, 'I learned to create such gender safety continuously, since I am sensitive to this topic and I know the boundary, which when crossed, it can be uncomfortable to some'.

The emotional burden of diversity work leads our communication partners to resort to their supportive systems, or even to a 'bubble', where they feel safe as GS scholars or when discussing related issues. In terms of caring for oneself, the creation of a support system throughout one's PhD studies was flagged as essential. These support systems can consist of networks of fellow PhD candidates (Barbora, PhDC), one's supervisor (Daniela, PhDC; Erika, ECR; Emma, ECR), GS scholars as thesis reviewers (Natália, ECR), supportive members of the department (usually women or other GS scholars) (Petra, PhDC; Erika, ECR), or GS academic associations/conferences (Erika, ECR; Barbora, PhDC). While choosing to retreat into one's safety 'bubble' can feel like a matter of survival, it also means isolating oneself from an academic community and creating a self-imposed exile. Thus, the early career GS scholars take on the additional emotional work of balancing individual safety and academic collectivity.

Table 1 Experiences of teaching and supervising students (code co-occurrence)

Code System	Toning it down	Managing own emotions	Facing sexism or racism	Carrying an issue	Dealing with identity or inequality	Discussions with students
Toning it down		7	9	2	2	14
Managing own emotions			6	8	20	15
Facing sexism or racism				0	7	11
Carrying an issue					11	8
Dealing with identity or inequality						23
Discussions with students						

5.3 Caring for social justice

When talking about the process of establishing a thesis topic, one commonly repeated position was that the primary driver was the PhDCs' and ECRs' values and interest in social justice issues. Petra worked at a human-rights-focused NGO before joining a PhD program, while Barbora currently works at an NGO, and Emma worked in one during and after her PhD studies. The values and attitudes of our communication partners thus also accompanied them into academia. While, according to Stromquist (2001), gender studies cannot avoid being political for having power analysis at its core, our communication partners' aims to confront inequality via academic work is a continuation of their life projects.

Teaching gender studies seems crucial to many; our communication partners often spoke about how they tend to 'stuff' these topics, perspectives, and examples into other courses deliberately, with the objective of mainstreaming gender scholarship. Furthermore, there were other practices mentioned that signify their engagement in social issues, such as doing political work in the form of research project press releases concerning gender inequalities and stereotypes (Natália, ECR).

Some practices of caring for social issues can be understood as institutional diversity work, whereby scholars challenge the norms and attitudes of others (Ahmed, 2012). PhDCs and ECRs spoke about 'educating' colleagues on gender and sexuality issues in their institutions or having arduous conversations about equality with their students. Barbora and Petra even spoke about the experience of being 'carriers of particular social issues', as individuals who embody social struggles and signify symbolic focal points with whom students share their experiences of oppression and harm: 'They freely out themselves in their student assignments, which they know will be read only by me. Or when I was supervising a BA thesis, a student came out to me; she was fearful of how I would react, and she was surprised that I did not react in any exceptional way or anything' (Barbora, PhDC). What is intriguing is the fact that PhDCs and ECRs tend to engage in these activities whether they feel support from their colleagues/management or not.

On the upside, some of our communication partners have had a fairly positive experience of being 'the gender person' (Ferguson, 2015) at their departments, thus continuing the practice of individualised institutionalisation (Pereira, 2017). Along with arduous experiences of diversity work come instances when dealing with a niche area of research, such as GS, can be a career benefit and a window of opportunity within a research project, as also discussed by Pereira (2017): 'So when they need someone [for the project], who understands feminist topics, they ask one of us, and it also brought me two job opportunities' (Erika, ECR). Some of our communication partners also find solace and a source of empowerment in the position of being a GS pioneer within their department or area of study among Slovak researchers. However, there is also a certain notion of exclusion and forced self-reliance attached to these experiences: 'At my [department], there are two colleagues of mine, they are both less than forty years old. They were trailblazers when it comes to this topic, but they have always been considered weirdos, so now I am with them in this weirdo club' (Erika, ECR).

5.4 Caring for students

As already discussed in the previous sections, PhDCs and ECRs address issues of marginalised identities and oppression within their teaching. This is work that can be highly personal – not only for the lecturer, but also for the students, who may feel personally involved. Our communication partners claimed that they generally receive very positive feedback on their teaching and courses. What is more, they notice among students a growing interest in GS or queer studies, which can be associated with the politicisation of these issues and their constant presence in the form of moral politics (Vargovčíková, 2021).

Students also reach out to their lecturers in order to speak about their personal experiences with inequality and marginalisation (predominantly in relation to their queer identities), whereby PhDCs and ECRs are addressed as institutional 'symbolic focal points' or 'carriers of social issues': '[W]hat happens to me on my courses is that [every] year, I have one or two people coming out to me in a way. I sense their frustration that LGBT people are discussed a lot, but it tends to happen without the participation of the LGBT community members' (Barbora, PhDC). What seems important to some who teach is the creation of temporal spaces of inclusion, establishing a sensitive language or addressing discrimination or bullying in their institutions when they come across them. These practices were often spoken about in a very positive manner, as a source of pride, or a badge of honour for winning the trust of students. Barbora, Erika, and Laura even claimed that it was especially teaching that they valued about their PhD experience.

While the communication partners talk about caring for students, a lack of care on the part of academic institutions becomes more obvious. For example, Erika and Petra have experience with addressing injustice towards students within the institution (e.g. bullying), but they are missing the institutional support – such as a university ombudsperson or a counselling centre – that would engage in care for said students. In this sense, institutions appear to be inflexible, while individual scholars function as emotional support (or institutional wadding): 'I sense their frustration, that they need to do something about it, but there is no place to do so, and so they hold onto people like us, because they know that they can come to us, or they can speak with us in their own language, and we will understand them and will be there for them. That is in regard to the protection, which I spoke about, which will not be provided by the institution' (Barbora, PhDC). It is not only institutions that rely on individual

scholars to (re)produce gender knowledge and serve as the 'gender person' whenever needed (e.g. in international or local projects); they also rely on individuals to provide continual support for students who are enrolled in large numbers to secure financial income for universities.

5.5 Caring for (one's academic) institution

Sara Ahmed claims that 'diversity practitioners do not simply work at institutions, they also work on them' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 22), encountering resistance and countering resistance. If we approach diversity work as attempts to make institutions more inclusive, this care for institutions is present also within the practices of educating colleagues or addressing inequalities.

While attempting institutional change, our communication partners had limited power at their disposal. When their individual work led to a certain success, it was very much appreciated, such as in the case described by Petra (PhDC): 'What I viewed as positive was the appreciation of one of my ideas – when I suggested that our [official] documents should be gender-sensitive, or at least gender-neutral. It enraged me that I have been a student [masc. gender] over the past five years [in the official documents]. So when I got to my PhD studies, I started changing that in our folders'. However, institutions were mostly seen as inflexible – starting with choice of supervisor and thesis topic, continuing with deficient flows of information or social dynamics in departments where lack of cooperation was common, as well as when it came to change in organisational culture (e.g. attempting de-hierarchisation) (see Figure 2). Moreover, when talking about 'educating colleagues' or 'educating students' and 'challenging their norms and attitudes', our communication partners often reproduced the hierarchical culture and the hierarchical mode of teaching in which one person explains the world to others. Gender knowledge provides them with limited and ambiguous power; it makes them feel they know more than the rest of their colleagues, but it also makes them feel responsible and eager to fill the institutional gaps with their individual work.

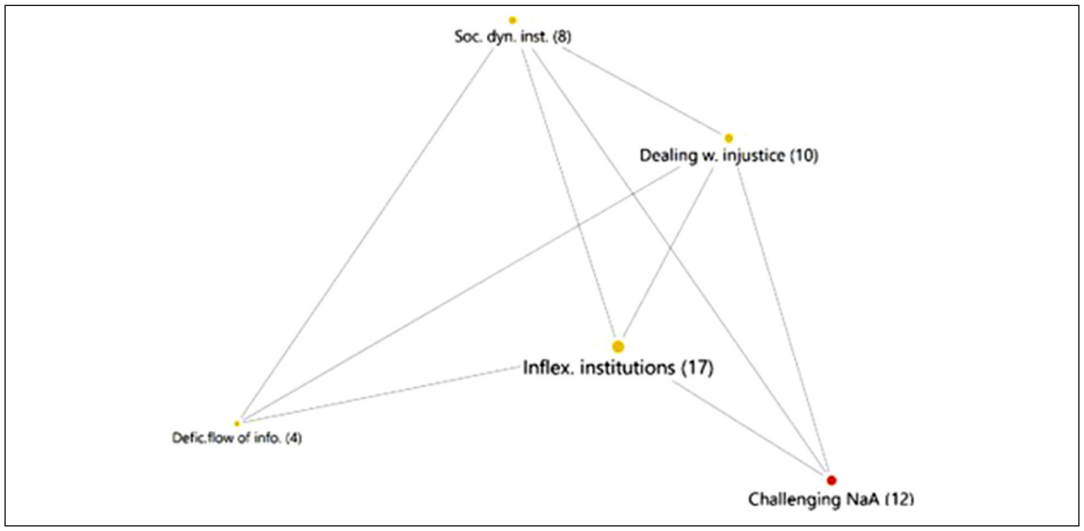

Figure 2 Experience with academic institutions – inflexible institutions (code co-occurrence)

6 Discussion and conclusions

The institutionalisation of GS in Slovakian academic epistemic communities has been rather limited over the past three decades, while some departments of social sciences benefit from individualised institutionalisation (Pereira, 2017). Notwithstanding, the presence of GS scholars in these environments is clearly scarce, which is reflected in the experiences of PhDCs and ECRs, many of whom lacked expert supervision at the beginning of their studies. Dependence on seniors is essential for these junior scholars (Boulila, Cheung & Lehotai 2019), as they constitute the support system, open up academic opportunities, and also figure as role models. Szapuová (2009, p. 157) also claims that a considerable amount of scientific skills happen to be based on implicit knowledge, such as knowing 'what constitutes a good academic article (in GS)', 'what is considered a legitimate (GS) research question', or 'what is a relevant critique (within GS)'. The PhDCs and ECRs we have spoken to shared various experiences of open hostility or lack of interest in their work in their own departments or at academic conferences. These are communities where PhDCs and ECRs do not find answers to the above questions, but these dilemmas can be overcome by cooperation elsewhere and with others, usually senior GS researchers (Jones, Martinez Dy & Vershinina, 2017). Not being able to access one's epistemic community is not only a result of lack of care in a higher education institution, but also threatens the students' academic identity, and becomes a significant source of institutional exclusion (Szapuová, 2009).

Throughout the discussions, PhDCs and ECRs spoke about various experiences of being or feeling isolated from one's academic community. For example, Natalia's public speaking in mainstream media about her research topic resulted in hostility from departmental colleagues, and her being threatened with a hearing at an ethics committee. But experiences such as not being invited to after-work drinks or to participate in research projects also surfaced. Being part of these communities also signifies how much an individual is an outsider to an institution, or how much one experiences a symbolic exile from academic epistemic communities. But challenging institutions and their members with regard to their norms and attitudes towards gender or race belongs to everyday deliberate practices for some. Since the PhDCs and ECRs do not work at feminist centres or attend feminist programs, they are prone to create temporal feminist communities and spaces of inclusion. By seeking contacts, teaching, and researching within the conditions they have (Ahmed, 2017), they engage in creating their own support systems as counter strategies. However, in their positions of PhDCs and ECRs, they often lack the necessary power or institutional positioning to push for significant institutional change, which brings feelings of frustration and, for some, also extra work (e.g. academic housework).

Teaching and working with students were named by many as the primary sources of joy and worth within their academic careers. When talking about discussions with students, for GS scholars, this means debating (gender) inequalities, which can be particularly emotionally demanding. But it is the positive feedback and the growing interest in these courses (not necessarily reflected by their academic institutions) that provide them with pride and satisfaction. Lovin (2018, p. 139) warns against such enjoyable and stimulating activities, as it 'constitutes an end in itself for many graduate students and fresh PhDCs who work as adjuncts, and it justifies living precariously at least for a period of time'. What is more, within the current academic structures, teaching and other above-mentioned practices of caring happen to be less valued than individual practices of 'academic excellence', such as working

in international research projects or writing papers for indexed journals (Pereira, 2020). While Taylor and Lahad (2018, p. 1) optimistically write that the practices of caring can 'offer freedom or flight from the corporatised and commercialised neoliberal university', such freedom is fragile and temporary for junior scholars, who experience multiple instances of stepping into academic exile while still training to become academics who need to prove they can succeed.

We further need to recognise that resource allocation and ideals of self-sufficient and competitive universities can signify a heavy burden for PhD candidates. Some GS PhDCs and ECRs succeed in filling a niche in Slovak social sciences, which opened up new opportunities for them. In this sense, Erika's statement about her department is rather telling of the co-optation of gender issues into the rationality of academic production (as described by Ferguson, 2014): 'The way I see it is that everyone knows that these topics have to be addressed [in research], but they do not understand why and they are glad that they do not have to' (Erika, ECR). For others, being the only GS scholar in a junior position at a department hostile to GS means being severely 'precarious', in the original meaning of the word: 'to be held at the whim of others / to be dependent upon others' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 129).

The weak institutionalisation of GS in Slovakia, the consequently fragmented gender-oriented epistemic community, and the neoliberalised academia pushing for competitiveness lead junior scholars to a sometimes self-imposed, other times forced symbolic exile within their institutions. While the exile is a space of exclusion and solitude, it also might be a space of care – for oneself, for others, for one's institution. Practices of caring then tie the scholars to others, knitting them into academic communities, which are also necessary for their careers. Such balancing between individualism and collectivity is part of the everyday invisible labour that keeps the presence of gender-oriented scholarship in an academic environment marked by limited institutionalisation of gender studies. This case study thus examines the agency of scholars who are more than victims of neoliberalising academic environments; it explores their subjectivation, resistance, and constant negotiation of power relations. It thus contributes to the critical university studies coming from the post-state socialist countries (Aavik, Riegraf & Nyklová, 2017; Kahlert, 2018), enriching the scholarship that has been mostly focused on Western context.

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