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**"Everyone has the right to their opinion":**

**'gender ideology' rhetoric and epistemic struggles in Slovak policymaking**

**Abstract**

Through the case study of the Slovak Committee on Gender Equality, a governmental advisory body, this article draws upon the growing literature on 'gender ideology' rhetoric in Central and Eastern Europe to study the efforts of advocates of that rhetoric to gain access to policymaking structures. With the aid of narrative research, we examine the Committee's struggles over appropriate terminology and discourse, data and research, and ultimately the status of experts. This shows how 'gender ideology' rhetoric serves to delegitimize gender knowledge, and how it eventually turns into knowledge itself.

**Keywords:** gender knowledge, gender ideology, epistemic struggles, gender equality policies, Slovakia

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last couple of years, most European countries have faced a growing impact of ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric among their political elites, counter-elites, and public opinion more broadly speaking. Though Slovakia has been no exception to this trend, a doomsday scenario of hampered progress in matters of equality within Slovak policymaking would be unconstructive. Indeed, the past three decades of equality policymaking by international or supranational organizations and national non-governmental actors can hardly be described as a smooth process of steady progress (Roth 2007). In light of these developments, the recent presence of ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric can be read as a new form of rather permanent opposition to (gender) equality.

Within Slovak politics and policies, ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric was first extensively promoted by the Roman-Catholic Church. With its pastoral letters, the Slovak Council of Bishops in particular has been promoting the notions of a so-called ‘culture of death’ and ‘gender ideology’ since 2012 (Maďarová 2015; Valkovičová 2017). However, the last years have seen a normalization of the rhetoric within policymaking structures as well as a mainstreaming of its promoters (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Coming from the non-governmental sector, these actors strive to operate within state policymaking structures, making use of democratic institutions which allow for civil society participation, for instance advisory bodies and working groups (Valkovičová and Maďarová 2019).

In the spirit of previous work that calls for an epistemological perspective on ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric and its use by a variety of actors (Korolczuk 2020; Pető 2015; Rothermel 2020; Verloo 2018a, 2018b; Verloo and Paternotte 2018), this article looks at the construction and contestation of knowledge within policymaking. More particularly, it investigates epistemic

struggles within the Slovak Committee on Gender Equality, an advisory body of the Governmental Council on Human Rights, Ethnic and National Minorities, and Gender Equality. Through a narrative reading of the advisory body's meeting minutes and cognitive and narrative interviews with its members, this article examines the Committee's struggles over appropriate terminology or discourse, data and research, and ultimately the status of experts. The article is structured as follows: the first section briefly discusses the rise of 'gender ideology' rhetoric in Europe and presents recent theorizations of this phenomenon, and the second section discusses its impact on gender knowledge and gender equality policies. The next sections discuss the Slovak case: section three describes the evolution of 'gender ideology' rhetoric in Slovak gender equality policymaking; section four presents the advisory body and the case study's chosen approach; and sections five and six analyze how, in a search for and struggle about legitimacy, the debate shifted from the use of appropriate terminology and discourse to one on data and research, and subsequently to the status of expertise and experts. In the concluding section we wrap up our main findings.

### **'GENDER IDEOLOGY' RHETORIC, ITS ACTORS, AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION**

The feminist projects and structures of state-sponsored feminism which have been developing in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) since the 1990s have recently witnessed new forms of opposition which use 'gender ideology' rhetoric as a discursive tool (Krizsán and Roggeband 2019). Established in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the political roots of this rhetoric can be traced to the Vatican. A reactive product of the Holy See, this ideological and political strategizing aimed to tackle the advancements in sexual liberalization and reproductive policies (Hennig 2018; Case 2016; Garbagnoli 2016). While the presence of 'gender ideology'

rhetoric has often been studied in relation to religious elites or civil society organizations (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), more recent scholarship in Europe and elsewhere also examines it among populist and radical right actors (Cullen 2020; Rawłuszko 2019; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Verloo 2018a).

Given the broad range of issues tackled with this rhetoric, and the variety of actors doing so, the rhetoric itself has been labeled a ‘symbolic glue’ in the opposition to developments in (gender) equality policymaking (Kováts and Põim 2015). Corredor (2019) lists the following similarities between the influences of ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric and its promoters: rejection of a hierarchical construction of race, gender, and heterosexism; essentialization and delegitimization of feminist and queer theory; opposition to global and local gender mainstreaming efforts; and the objective to eradicate LGBTI and (other) equality policies and reaffirm patriarchal and heteronormative concepts of gender and sexuality. While the terms anti-genderism or anti-gender are also used to describe this rhetoric or movement (see e.g. Korolczuk 2016; Corredor 2019), we prefer the term ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric, since one of its crucial features is the fact that it sets gender knowledge and studies aside as ‘ideology,’ as will be explained more in detail below, whereas the ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric itself cannot be completely stripped of its ideological content and connotation, which is a useful reminder of its religious origins (Hennig 2018).

Within the CEE region, ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric has been adopted by a variety of political actors, some of whom have strategically attempted to strip it of its religious attire, for example by cladding it in ‘scientific discourse’ (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Valkovičová and Hardoš 2018). Kuhar (2015) argues that organizations in the Western Balkans which opposed equality policies were effective *because* they were able to ground their opposition within a populist scientific discourse. As arguments of sinfulness or the like no longer appeal to voters

and public opinion, these civil society organizations can no longer campaign using their conventional faith-based discourse. Therefore, they have established a 'populist scientific discourse' by "presenting distorted data, [...] promoting conspiracy theories (sic!), and pseudo-scientific data" (Kuhar 2015, 90; see also Saurette and Gordon 2013 for a similar stripping of the Canadian abortion debate of its religious references). Stambolis-Ruhstorfer (2018) investigated similar (and successful) practices of conservative political actors in the USA and France. He understands scientific discourse in the Bourdieusian sense as a form of expert capital, a material and discursive resource applied by actors in order to access legitimacy and assert their position in policymaking structures.

In the same vein, Korolczuk (2016) emphasizes the populist concept of 'alternative expertise', which wants to present itself as legitimate vis-à-vis democratic institutions inclusive and responsive to the demands of civil society. Though the proclaimed objectives tend to be moral, 'gender ideology' rhetoric's claims are labelled as scientific knowledge or alternative expert opinions. She underlines the efforts to scientifically legitimize 'anti-genderism' across the CEE region through the production of alternative expertise: "Profoundly suspicious of existing academic institutions, anti-genderism has built up its own sources of legitimacy, a body of knowledge, and its own pantheon of intellectual celebrities with academic titles, many of them women" (Korolczuk 2016, 245).

Studying 'gender ideology' rhetoric and its opposition towards gender equality and feminist projects in Hungary in particular, Pető (2015, 2019) also claims that science has become the main battleground. Drawing on such observations, there have already been calls for an epistemic turn (see e.g. Verloo 2018a, 2018b; Verloo and Paternotte 2018) in studying 'gender ideology' rhetoric and the so-called anti-gender countermovement (Corredor 2019). Missing from the growing body of literature so far have been inquiries into particular

discursive strategies deployed by 'gender ideology' rhetoric actors aiming to counter a feminist agenda within policymaking bodies. Taking into consideration established cooperative structures between the state and actors in feminist and women's rights movements, it is important to question how such established networks now also come under attack.

### **'GENDER IDEOLOGY' RHETORIC AS AN EPISTEMIC RESPONSE TO FEMINIST PROJECTS AND THEIR COOPERATION WITH THE STATE**

Corredor (2019) argues that 'gender ideology' rhetoric is:

first and foremost an epistemological response to emancipatory claims about sex, gender, and sexuality, and second, a political mechanism used to contain policy developments associated with feminist and queer agendas (614).

In the same vein, Korolczuk (2020), analyzing the Polish 2016 debates against abortion, contends that actors promulgating the 'gender ideology' rhetoric aim to establish a new paradigm on gender, sexuality, and equality. Emphasizing gender as an ideology is a strategy meant to delegitimize existing gender knowledge and replace it with a different type of knowledge based on what is also known as the three Ns: nature, nation, and norms. She argues that actors that oppose gender knowledge and employ the 'gender ideology' rhetoric not only seek the *political* power to oppose certain gender equality policies, but also the *epistemic* power to establish a new paradigm for future policies and society at large. 'Gender ideology' rhetoric can thus be understood as an epistemological counter to existing European trends in gender equality policymaking, affecting not only policies, but also

policymaking structures and the role of feminist and women's rights actors in civil society (Verloo 2018a).

As Verloo (2018a) posits, feminist activism has played a crucial role within the CEE and elsewhere in establishing state-sponsored feminism and producing non-essentialist and gendered knowledge about particular social phenomena influencing policy discourses (Walby 2011; Kantola and Squires 2012). Femocrats, the core agents in the relationship between the state and the feminist and women's movement, have been established as relevant actors, and their position has gradually been institutionalized through European policymaking (McBride Stetson and Mazur 1995; Kantola and Squires 2012). Despite much-criticized technocratic and 'room service' adaptations and transpositions, feminist discourses have now been shaping policies for decades, and since the 1990s feminists within European Union Member States' public policies have inspired an undeniable gendered discourse of policy problems (Sedelmeier 2009; Očenášová 2011; Sutlović 2019). As Krizsán and Roggeband (2019) contend, co-operation with state actors, along with predominantly transactional strategies, has so far been the most efficient strategy for CEE women's movements actors to advance a feminist agenda.

The by-product of these developments has been the establishment of a gender expertise imbued with authority in policymaking. This expertise should be understood as specialized knowledge fulfilling two criteria: not only should it involve a thorough knowledge of the causes and effects of gender inequalities, but there should also be a demand among state structures and policymaking actors for this kind of expertise (Hoard 2015; Kunz and Průgl 2019; Seibicke 2019). It is important to underline that this knowledge always comprises non-essentialist understandings of gender (Verloo 2018a). In this article, we will more precisely understand gender expertise or knowledge as:



Explicit and implicit representations concerning the differences between the sexes and the relations between them, the origins and normative significance of these, the rationale and evidence underpinning them, and their material form (Cavaghan 2017, 48).

More recently, Krizsán and Roggeband (2019) have studied the backsliding of gender equality policies in the CEE region, paying particular attention to the shifting role of feminist and women's rights actors who have been sources of gender expertise. The perspective framing 'gender ideology' rhetoric as an epistemic response to these actors' agenda falls well within this framework. Krizsán and Roggeband contend that there is incremental policy backsliding at the democratic institutions threatened by the rhetoric. These backsliding processes can effect policy decay by dismantling and reframing existing policies; discursively delegitimizing gender equality policies' objectives; undermining the implementation of these policies; and eroding inclusive mechanisms. Velvet triangles and structures of 'state-sponsored feminism' (Woodward 2004; Walby 2011; Kantola and Squires 2012) that network bureaucrats, elected officials, and academics/NGO representatives have been criticized for their quasi-monopoly over policy issues (Engeli and Mazur 2018). The use of 'gender ideology' rhetoric within policymaking structures can thus be understood as a tool to discursively delegitimize gender equality projects and sideline the abovementioned feminist actors who have previously benefitted from epistemic privilege within these structures (Fricker 1999; McKinnon 2016).

In a similar vein, Ahrens (2018) has analyzed European Union-level policymaking and distinguished the following three diffuse and indirect barriers to gender (and other forms of) equality that arise when more open and direct opposition to gender equality is difficult: inertia, evasion, and degradation. Inertia means giving gender equality issues less priority

and attention than other issues through unsupportive hierarchies or negligence, but also by ignoring relevant research. Evasion involves avoiding participation in, or exchange about, gender equality issues. Degradation targets actors individually by questioning their credibility.

Investigating the Slovak advisory body Committee on Gender Equality, our case study closely examines the epistemic struggles over legitimacy and authority within policymaking structures that contribute to the backsliding of gender equality policies. It demonstrates how civil society actors deploy a variety of discursive practices connected to ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric to block policy proposals and sideline feminist and women’s rights organizations. The following section presents the evolution of ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric in Slovak politics and policymaking at large, as early forms of it will also be detected within the Committee on Gender Equality.

## **SLOVAK GENDER EQUALITY POLICIES AND ‘GENDER IDEOLOGY’ RHETORIC**

Slovak gender equality policies, specifically in the area of reproductive rights, have faced severe opposition since the late 1990s (Očenášová 2011; Zampas and Andión-Ibañez 2012). The 2000s were first characterized by the conservative and right-wing influence of conservative and nationalist political parties (the Christian Democrats, KDH, and the nationalist party, SNS), and of religious elites such as the Slovak Conference of Bishops (Kobová 2011). Over the last decade, Slovakia’s politics and policies have seen a growing impact of ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric (Maďarová 2015; Sekerák 2015; Valkovičová 2017). The rhetoric steadily became the preferred tool of conservative and religious Slovak political actors (Kováts and Põim 2015), especially after the 2012–2013 visits of Gabriele Kuby, a conservative, pro-life German sociologist presenting her book *The Global Sexual Revolution:*

*Destruction of Freedom in the Name of Freedom*. Though her visits introduced broader conservative and faith-based activist circles to ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric (Korolczuk and Graff 2018), the rhetoric can also be traced back to the Roman-Catholic religious elites, more precisely the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia and their pastoral letters (Valkovičová 2017; Maďarová 2015).

While scholars noted the influence of the Roman-Catholic Church on Slovak gender equality policies long before the former adopted the ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric (see e.g. Kobová 2011), these elites have been very successful in blocking crucial developments in the areas of gender equality and human rights over the past decade. Telling examples are the *National Strategy of Gender Equality 2014–2019* and the *National Strategy for Human Rights Protection and Promotion* of 2014, both of which were extensively criticized by the Slovak Council of Bishops and the Christian Democrats. Already in 2013, they established a campaign against the aforementioned *National Strategy for Human Rights*, calling for the abolition of ‘gender ideology’. In order to clarify these terms, they organized press conferences and roundtables with experts from the Slovak Academy of Sciences, also writing, amongst other things, an open letter to counter ‘gender ideology’ (European Parliament Think Tank 2013). Their success was limited. However, in 2014, the Ministry of Education issued a statement opposing the *National Strategy for Human Rights’* provisions on gender-sensitive education, arguing that it is ideological, and leads to a “forced sexualization of children” and to “experimentation with the emotional development of children, which is unethical and immoral” (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky 2014). Such opposition also arose during the deliberations of the Committee on Gender Equality, as will be explained below, where members of the non-governmental sector criticized the content of both strategies on the grounds that they

included sections on LGBTI rights and education, thus stimulating the acceptance of sexual minorities.

In 2015, an umbrella non-governmental initiative *Aliancia za rodinu* (Alliance for the Family) initiated the 'Referendum on the Family' to reinforce the heteronormative family model and halt adoption endeavors by same-sex couples (Maďarová 2015). The request for a referendum was launched through a petition and circulated with the help of local municipalities and churches, most notably the Roman-Catholic Church (Sekerák 2015). Although eventually unsuccessful, the campaign led to the normalization of 'gender ideology' discourse as a scientific and secular one. Discursive strategies used in the campaign included denouncing existing social science research and relying on studies that were often discredited by the academic community, amongst others for being methodologically problematic (Valkovičová and Hardoš 2018). While the Alliance for the Family failed to mobilize enough citizens, it became part of a dense network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other political actors working with policymaking structures (1) (Rybár and Ševčíková 2017). After 2015, this network grew into a social movement represented at massive 'Marches for Life' with strong political potential. The initiators of the referendum, as well as their rhetoric, were also picked up by the Slovak political elites (Valkovičová and Maďarová 2019).

The most recent example of this mainstreaming of 'gender ideology' rhetoric into the political discourse of dominant political elites in Slovakia is that of the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. To date, a number of political parties have rejected it for breaking down traditional sex roles. In 2018, the leader of the ruling Social-Democrats (SMER-SD), Prime Minister Robert Fico, publicly denounced the Istanbul Convention and expressed his desire to put its

ratification on hold. In spring 2019, the Slovak legislature voted against ratifying the convention with a two-thirds majority.

The policymaking environment was thus already affected by ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric before it went mainstream after the 2015 referendum. To establish themselves as legitimate actors vis-à-vis the state, several actors have also used the rhetoric within the Slovak Committee on Gender Equality, where they have been thriving and gaining importance since.

## **STRUGGLES IN THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE – THE SLOVAK CASE STUDY AND ITS OBJECTIVES**

This case study aims to meet the increasing call for research on epistemic struggles to gain understanding of the challenges at stake (Korolczuk 2020; Rothermel 2020; Verloo 2018a, 2018b; Verloo and Paternotte 2018). The Slovak Committee on Gender Equality (from here on called the Committee) was launched as an advisory body to the Governmental Council on Human Rights, Ethnic and National Minorities, which was instated under the moderately right-wing government of Slovakia’s first female Prime Minister Iveta Radičová (SDKÚ-DS) in 2011 (2). Functioning under the Governmental Council in the areas covered by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the advisory body, chaired by the Minister of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family, comprises governmental and public sector representatives (including the Department of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities), as well as a wide range of non-governmental representatives. The case study covers the first mandate of the Committee, a six-year period, between 2011 and 2017.

The Committee was established as an expert consulting body in the area of gender equality and equal opportunities (including gender-based violence) that would include non-

governmental actors within policymaking. While the Slovak Academy of Sciences is assured a seat on the Committee, other scholars and researchers also regularly attended meetings in the studied period. These actors overwhelmingly represented the non-governmental sector, therefore also carrying the label of (feminist) civil society actors.

As a platform for expert knowledge-sharing, the Committee establishes working groups to conduct its specific activities. While the Committee has no formal competences, its main aim is to provide incentives and expertise for the development of gender equality policies. This includes assessing and analyzing new legislation and policy developments; helping develop strategic documents and their monitoring; and determining whether international obligations are being fulfilled (Rada vlády SR 2011).

It is chaired by the Minister of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family, who then names the vice-chair based on a proposal by Committee members (usually someone from the non-governmental sector). The Committee further comprises governmental and public sector representatives (including the Department of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities), as well as a wide range of non-governmental representatives. Other non-governmental organizations can apply for Committee membership and are appointed by the chair. As membership is ascribed to organizations, not individuals, organizations have to be regularly represented (Rada vlády SR 2011). The period under study, which corresponds to the Committee's first mandate (2011–2017), saw 33 nominations from the public sector and 29 from civil society. Since the Committee's regulations were amended in 2017, the advisory body currently allows only about a third of the previously afforded seats to civil society organizations.

This study draws upon narrative research – consisting of narrative and cognitive interviews with members and a narrative reading of the 15 Committee sessions' meeting minutes – to study the discursive practices on the Committee (3). As the cornerstone of such an inquiry, a

narrative is not understood as a simple 'telling' (Boje 2001, 1), but as a 'connected succession of happenings' – a kind of storytelling that helps actors to make sense of their own experiences. Narrative readings recognize that storytelling is a widespread cultural practice, even a culturally significant psychological strategy serving individuals' memories (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiachy and Zilber 1998). As it allows studying behavior within organizations, and thus also practices of change and organizational discourse, it has been applied within the field of organizational studies (Heinen 2009). Of particular interest is the fact that it gives voice to actors who do not dominate (and might be marginalized in) organizational discourses (Boje 2001). Narrative research allows us to study policy discursive framing, the different representations of policy problems and solutions provided by political actors (Verloo and Lombardo 2007).

Qualitative narrative and cognitive interviews with Committee members helps unveil the different ideas and beliefs underpinning their lives, routines, and behaviors, as well as their understanding of Committee's organizational practices. Such interviews record human experience by reconstructing individual and personal stories (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Webster and Mertova 2007). The selected sample of narrative and cognitive interviews was based on purposive non-probability sampling (Brinkmann and Kvale 2014) in function of Committee membership. Some of the interviewees, specifically those from the non-governmental sector, were first identified through the narrative reading of the meeting minutes and then through the interview process. Within the 14-month period starting in February 2017, 22 people consented to be interviewed, which resulted in 18 individual and two group interviews (each comprising two interviewees). Interviews took 30 minutes to two hours. They were recorded and later transcribed verbatim and translated into English. The interview analysis involved both open and axial coding (Brinkmann and Kvale 2014).

Committee members who actively used 'gender ideology' rhetoric, and contested terminology, data, and expertise, formed an internal alliance we have dubbed the 'oppositional coalition' (4). Their practices and rhetoric countered developments in gender equality policymaking, particularly those adhering to conventional feminist concepts of gender equality. The actors engaging in these discursive practices were generally members of fathers' rights organizations and Catholic civil society organizations. Actors who actively resisted such countering and delegitimizing strategies were members of feminist/women's rights organizations, which is why we will dub them the 'feminist coalition.' While we believe these two coalitions should not be perceived as formal or fixed, interviewees tended to self-identify as members of either coalition based on their background and knowledge, often distinguishing between 'us and them.'

Along with NGO members, some public-sector representatives also countered 'gender ideology' rhetoric and delegitimizing discursive practices, which points to the voluntary nature of such coalitions. It should also be mentioned that members of the feminist coalition represented established feminist and women's rights NGOs which have previously cooperated with state actors (particularly the Department of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities), be it within working groups, common advocacy projects, or when their NGOs drew on state or European funding. Many of the activists representing the feminist and women's rights organizations also previously worked for the Department or extensively cooperated with its employees. Compared to the oppositional coalition, which rarely engaged in such cooperation, the link between feminist coalition and the state was undeniable.



## EPISTEMIC STRUGGLES AS CONFLICTS OVER TERMINOLOGY

The meeting minutes and the interviews revealed that ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric originally appeared in the Committee in 2013 along with the first discussions on the appropriate terminology to be used in the strategic and framework documents. For example, one NGO representative claimed that a group of Committee members “do not agree with the dominant terminology applied within the Committee” (5). The representative specifically referred to the terms ‘gender’ and ‘gender-based violence,’ which according to him were dismissed by some members. And in October 2013 two Committee members stated that, since the concept of gender was problematic and confusing, ‘sex’ and ‘sex-based violence’ should be used instead.

The minutes reveal a number of occasions when the question of appropriate terminology arose. These debates included a number of NGO representatives openly opposing the use of ‘gender’ or ‘gender equality’. In order to tackle such opposition, public sector and other NGO representatives argued that this was the terminology used in international conventions, specifically the Istanbul Convention, CEDAW, and the *EU Victim’s Directive* (6), thus appealing to international norms (and their promoters) as the epistemic authority. Similar practices of opposing the gendered nature of violence and refusing particular terminology were also present during the debates on ratifying the Istanbul Convention, particularly in the meeting of October 21, 2013, where some NGO members openly refuted the term gender-based violence, thereby countering the gendered aspect of violence. During this discussion, some NGO members argued that international conventions promoting ‘gender ideology’ needed to be discarded and common sense be used instead (7). This rhetoric continued to be used in a 2015 debate, when some NGO members rejected the Istanbul Convention itself for “promoting gender ideology imposed from above” (8). These members thus not only opposed the concept of gender-based violence, but also discarded epistemic authorities such as

international organizations. NGO members voiced similar opposition during interviewing (interviewees 20 and 21 – both NGO).

Some members thus used ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric to oppose and delegitimize the Committee’s agenda, mainly in the area of gender-based violence. Concepts adopted from feminist academia and activism, such as gender and gender-based violence, were refuted as ideological by labeling them as ‘gender ideology’. While such conflicts over appropriate terminology or discourse (and thus the discursive framework of Slovak gender equality policies) within the Committee started in 2013 and continued through 2015, later discussions saw a shift in focus. From 2015 onwards there were no longer only struggles over appropriate terminology or discourse, but also over data and research, and ultimately over the status of certain experts and their presence in the Committee.

### **CONFLICTS OVER DATA, RESEARCH, AND EXPERTISE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF LEGITIMACY**

On June 3, 2015, the Committee members discussed recent developments in policies tackling gender-based violence, particularly in national legislation. Some NGO members argued that policy frameworks often omit men’s experiences and that false accusations of sexual and domestic violence are never taken into consideration by international and national indexes measuring violence. One NGO representative also claimed that the choice of indicators for evidence-based policymaking is subjective and allows women’s organizations to “fabricate abused women” (9). The dispute which followed was concluded by a representative of the Ministry of Labor, Family Affairs, and Family, who stated that “everyone has the right to an opinion.” Another NGO representative argued that “though feminist organizations are in the majority in the Committee, that does not mean that they are qualified to provide expertise”.

Such discursive strategies of actors countering data and research findings were further addressed during the interviews. Most interviewees mentioned other Committee members either doubted the reliability or validity of the data feeding the policymaking process or criticized the policy framing of the development indexes. For example, one member (interviewee 8 - NGO) posited that data from international indexes on LGBTI people's experiences of violence and discrimination were ideologically biased and therefore inherently unreliable and thus invalid. According to him, statistical data based on self-identification was by default unreliable, as individuals could simply not tell the truth. Another interviewee, a researcher in social sciences, recalled a number of instances when she tried to communicate data on violence and discrimination within the Committee and was confronted with the argument that "what you ask for, that's what you measure" (interviewee 12 – NGO/academia).

The connection of experts to expertise should not be disregarded, as one of the members of the oppositional coalition explains:

Let me tell you this, if the results were presented by neutral people in a neutral environment, that would have been acceptable. But if these results are always presented by the *same people* (interviewer's emphasis), then the data's credibility is problematic because of the people's credibility (interviewee 8 – NGO).

The meeting minutes indeed reveal that over time the conflicts shifted from questioning expertise to questioning experts. During a 2015 meeting, a member from the NGO sector claimed that the "ministry should reconsider cooperation with some NGOs, as they provide false and invalid data on the situation of gender equality in Slovakia." This was in relation to the shadow report to the CEDAW committee and the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Periodic Reviews, all drafted

by a number of feminist and women's NGOs that are also Committee members (10). This debate was further pursued during the meeting of June 13, 2016, when members of the oppositional coalition argued that the shadow report was biased (11), as the provided knowledge could not be accepted as objective expertise. In this vein, they argued that the report contained an ideological perspective on reproductive rights. By labelling their approach as ideological rather than scientific, they criticized the reporting process and rapporteurs as ideologically biased and unreliable. The representatives of feminist NGOs were presented as lobbyists rather than as gender equality experts with a legitimate claim to participate in the policymaking process.

Conflicts on the legitimacy of knowledge and expertise continued to the end of 2016, when the Committee's new regulations were debated and questions on Committee membership put on the table. The draft regulations contained the suggestion to only accept representatives of NGOs which explicitly adhered to the concept of gender equality in their organizational statutes. This was rejected by a number of NGO representatives. One member questioned the proposal, as he claimed it would exclude organizations representing fathers' rights. He also invited the members of the Committee to reflect on the question of who is recognized as an expert on gender equality. According to him, anyone with a formal education in social sciences should be considered a possible expert. A representative of the Department for Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities responded that the Committee values a plurality of opinions, but that: "questioning of the area of violence against women cannot be understood as a plurality of opinions, since there is clear data and evidence" (12).

Both groups of actors, whether from the feminist or the oppositional coalition, tended to identify the other as ideologues rather than experts. This practice was most eloquently described by a representative of a feminist NGO (interviewee 16 - NGO):

Well, we [feminist coalition] have canasta cards and we would like to play bridge... and they [oppositional coalition] are seated at the table with us, but what they have are Uno cards... so, it is difficult to argue with someone who does not have the basic knowledge.

Another member of the feminist coalition adopted a similar position :

When you keep constantly hearing about gender ideology in the Committee on Gender Equality..., that's like you went to a string theory lecture and someone would claim that the earth is flat... it was very frustrating, and thus the Committee never progressed. (interviewee 7 - NGO).

The data reveal that governmental representatives, and especially employees of the Department for Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities, had a crucial role in these struggles. In some cases, they positioned themselves as members of the feminist coalition, and sometimes as mediators or coalition brokers. The recognition of 'gender ideology' rhetoric by some members of the governmental sector as 'just another point of view' legitimized the rhetoric's early appearances in the Committee, as the oppositional coalition members were recognized as equal to those of the feminist coalition. Their discursive framing of the policy frameworks was validated as different but equally valid. However, it was also representatives of the Department who later attempted to set the epistemic framework of who constitutes an expert on gender equality by linking it to the recognition of existing data and research. Still, governmental representatives of other ministries defined the conflicts as a matter of differing opinions (also advocated by interviewees 14 and 15 – GOV), which any member of the Committee is entitled to present.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our case study investigated the struggles within the Slovak Committee on Gender Equality over appropriate terminology or discourse, data, and research, and ultimately the status of legitimate expertise and experts, during its first mandate, 2011–2017. From 2013 onwards, ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric was established within this advisory body to actively counter the Committee’s agenda. With the aid of narrative research, this case illustrates how ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric was used as leverage to gain influence and legitimacy within the Committee, and in the process delegitimize the gender knowledge actors traditionally dominant within that Committee. While it may look at the outset as if Committee members simply debated the correct terminology, for instance when it came to the topic of violence, members adhering to ‘gender ideology’ rhetoric were actually discursively negotiating both policy issues, for instance by de-gendering violence as a concept and social practice, but also their expertise and position, as well as that of the other members of the Committee.

The oppositional coalition not only actively negotiated within the Committee, they were also successful in blocking progress in the Committee’s work. This was possible since the agenda of the body is consensus-based, so the Committee in many instances within the studied period was unable to pass any decisions or issue statements, as no majority could be achieved on basic questions – e.g. what sort of terminology should be used (this includes instances when governmental officials abstained). While the oppositional coalition constituted a minority within the body, they were sometimes able to ensure official opt-out statements, claiming that they disagreed with the Committee’s majority position (for example the opt-out statement of two non-governmental organizations issued on 2 October, 2014, concerning the draft version of the *National Strategy on Gender Equality 2014–2019* and its *Action Plan*). Members of the feminist coalition were left few tools to counter such reactionary rhetoric.

They referred to outside authorities (such as international organizations and their policymaking), but at times benefitted from instances where government officials sided with them. What is apparent is that they experienced considerable frustration and helplessness, as they had to put up with the rhetoric and the oppositional coalition as equal partners within the Committee.

This questioning of first terminology and discourse, then data and research, and ultimately the status of experts and legitimate expertise fits with other research investigating opposition to gender equality and the role of 'gender ideology' rhetoric and actors using it. These steps or tactics during the epistemic struggle in the Slovak Committee on Gender Equality correspond to what Krizsán and Roggeband (2019) describe as the reframing of existing policies and the discursive delegitimization of gender equality policies' objectives. More precisely, what we witnessed was a discursive de-gendering of the topic of violence, delegitimizing gender knowledge actors as experts, questioning data and research methodology, and openly opposing international organizations and conventions by arguing that they are ideologically biased.

Contrary to what Ahrens (2018) found at the European Union level, such opposition was not indirect (through inertia or evasion), but rather open and direct. Recognizing that it is a struggle over epistemic power, as Korolczuk (2020) calls it, might be helpful in explaining why it came to an open conflict. Indeed, the question has become not simply one of making the correct or best political decision, but of making a political decision based on the *right* or *correct* data or research based on *legitimate* expertise. While the ultimate objective may be the same, such conflicts in policymaking structures shifts the debates' attention to a different level. Gender knowledge actors not only need to defend their point of view, but also what it is based on and ultimately even their own position. This is what Ahrens (2018)

has called an indirect degradation strategy, targeting actors by questioning their credibility and legitimacy. In the case of the Slovak Committee on Gender Equality, this degradation or delegitimization was pretty much out in the open. It is a rather direct form of opposition to gender equality (policies), especially when combined with questioning the validity of data and research. It is indirect in that it only directly targets actors defending particular policies, not the policies as such. However, in combination with the questioning of the legitimacy of terminology, data, and research, it becomes open opposition to the issue at stake. This position may be further delegitimized and weakened if emphasis is placed on the embedded character of knowledge and expertise, which many gender knowledge actors and scholars support, whereas 'gender ideology' rhetoric espouse a form of knowledge based on 'absolute truth' (Korolczuk 2020). What further complicates the position of gender knowledge actors in the Committee is their label of 'civil society actors' as many of them are representatives of feminist and women's rights organizations. This makes it easier for the opposition to question their objectivity.

As the Slovak case has illustrated, 'gender ideology' rhetoric can be used as a discursive and epistemic tool to gain legitimacy and break into governmental advisory committees – and eventually other policymaking structures. Our analysis shows how oppositional members and their 'gender ideology' discourse have become a legitimate voice in the policymaking process, thereby challenging the (discursive) framework and quasi-monopoly of gender knowledge actors within the Committee. Important in this case were the representatives of state structures and the role they play as gatekeepers. As the Slovak Committee on Gender Equality is a body where members using 'gender ideology' rhetoric democratically gained access to policymaking structures as representatives of civil society, ministerial representatives played an important role in this maneuvering between 'gender ideology' rhetoric and gender



knowledge. The Slovak case urges scholars to critically review what was long considered a valid road towards a more gender-equal society. For the Polish case, Korolczuk (2020) argued that the women's movement was able to counteract the epistemic strategies deployed by ultraconservative anti-abortion movements precisely by invoking, amongst others, medical and legal expertise. However, as Rothermel (2020) contends, ultraconservative movements function with a zero-sum game logic: their project consists of what she calls a 'death wish' for any other project than theirs, not a 'life wish' for various political projects to co-exist. All of the former prompts us to underscore, similarly to other scholars, the need to investigate not only struggles for political but also epistemic power, and how these struggles feed or undermine each other.

## Notes

- (1) These include organizations which are also members of the advisory body studied in this paper, such as *Fórum kresťanských inštitúcií* (Christian Institutions Forum) and *Katolícke hnutie žien Slovenska* (The Catholic Movement of Women of Slovakia).
- (2) Before the government of Iveta Radičová, the left-leaning government of Robert Fico (2006–2010) contained a separate Governmental Council on Gender Equality.
- (3) These include the following sessions: September 23, 2011; November 10, 2011; December 1, 2011; February 17, 2012; September 25, 2012; January 28, 2013; October 23, 2013; January 30, 2014; May 20, 2014; October 2, 2014; February 24, 2015; June 3, 2015; October 13, 2015; June 13, 2016; and November 28, 2016. Accessed July 14, 2017. This sample includes all registered sessions between 2011 (at the inception of the Committee) and 2017. There were only two sessions in 2018, neither of which were included within this sample. There was no session in 2019. Meeting minutes are available at:

<https://www.employment.gov.sk/sk/vybor-pre-rodovu-rovnost/>

and

<https://www.minv.sk/?zlozenie-expertnej-skupiny-pre-eliminaciu-nasilia-parchaneho-na-zenach>.

- (4) An example of such a practice is opposition to the terms 'gender' and 'gender equality' applied by the oppositional actors, or a direct opposition to or rejection of a feminist agenda.
- (5) Committee on Gender Equality, meeting minutes October 21, 2013.
- (6) Committee on Gender Equality, meeting minutes January 30, 2014.
- (7) Committee on Gender Equality, meeting minutes October 21, 2013.
- (8) Committee on Gender Equality, meeting minutes June 3, 2015.
- (9) Committee on Gender Equality, meeting minutes June 3, 2015.
- (10) Committee on Gender Equality, meeting minutes October 13, 2015.
- (11) Committee on Gender Equality, meeting minutes June 13, 2016.
- (12) Committee on Gender Equality, meeting minutes November 28, 2016.

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