

Progressive Chivalry? – Changing Forms of Masculinity

by Rita Antoni

Are there any universal masculine attributes? How are expectations towards men changing and how do men themselves feel about them? What social challenges do men have to face? How can men contribute to gender equality? – among others, these questions were discussed at the event of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung on the 25th of March.

The workshop entitled ‘Changing forms of masculinity & men’s role in achieving gender equality’ attracted an unusually large audience. The event was organized within the framework of the foundation’s regional programme running since 2012, called “Gender Equality in East-Central Europe.” The event took place as a part of a series of public debates called *Dialogue on Gender Equality*; the previous occasions focused on the Europe-wide anti-gender mobilizations and on the topics related to motherhood. Just like the previous events of the Foundation’ series, people of different nationality, scientific background and worldview were trying to find the possibilities of dialogue. Diversity was highly crucial this time, since, as Andrea Pető put it, ‘everyone is an expert’ in the question of gender.

Eszter Kováts, project leader greeted the participants: representatives of NGOs, political parties, companies, trade unions, as well as journalists and university students. She emphasized that Jól-Lét Foundation has been addressing the issue of masculinity for years – participants could get their publication entitled *Visible Fathers* at the venue. Kováts argued that the perspective of intersectionality is of utmost importance, since, although men globally have more access to resources, its extent may be modified by social factors like race, class, sexual orientation and disability, therefore it is not sufficient to speak exclusively about men and women. The organizer reminded the audience of the Hungarian traditions of men's feminism: in the early 20th century, along with the Association of Feminists, there was a group called *Men's League for Women's Suffrage*, with prominent politicians, lawyers and doctors among the members.

The historian **Andrea Pető**, who is strongly devoted to encouraging dialogue between different worldviews, took up the role of the moderator. She introduced a recently published collection of essays called [*Women Up! 2. A transatlantic gender dialogue*](#), then argued that when speaking of masculinity it is important to use a language, which addresses a wide range of audience. The main reason for this is that far right is pressing forward, and, with well-prepared policy argumentation, is gaining more and more ground in, for example, family policy. Furthermore, it applies ‘re-enchantment’ effectively – Max Weber used the term „disenchantment” referring to de-sacralization, and Pető rephrased it in relation to masculinity – e.g. creating men's camps. Not to mention the fact that by now the feminist and human rights' movements came to a deadlock, their social basis hasn't grown recently, so ‘re-enchantment’ poses a challenge to the activists involved in them as well.

In the first section lecturers of very different worldview delivered their papers, generating a lively debate.

The first lecture was delivered by sociologist **Miklós Hadas**, who declares himself a pro-feminist. He argued that popularizing academic terminology of Gender Studies is useful and important.

The first scholars dealing with masculinity reflected on something which wasn't the object of academic research before, since it was regarded as something given, it was taken for granted. Feminist epistemology and deconstruction revealed that the 'godly perspective,' the alleged 'objectivity' is, in fact, the male point of view. As Hadas put it, 'we had to recognize that masculinity is a gender, too.' As a result, the new academic discipline called Women's Studies was, in the seventies, extended into Gender Studies. As its part, (Critical) Men's Studies was introduced.

The lecturer's research is based on the views of Pierre Bourdieu, who takes masculinity as a habitus, with 'libido dominandi' as its fundamental category. According to Bourdieu, men are socially constructed in the way that they want to fight, the want to defeat, to dominate their male opponent, and the women belonging to him (e.g. through war rape). It leads to a lifelong fight – the Weberian 'clear type' is the man at war. According to this logic, 'either I kill you, or you kill me, and there is no third option.'

Hadas criticizes Bourdieu because of his ahistorical approach: he fails to consider that masculinity is differently constructed in each historical era. In the 19th century the spirit of capitalism predominates, and fighting masculinity is gradually replaced by competing masculinity: now men do not seek to kill, but to surpass each other, not in the war, but in the market sphere. As free time appears, another masculine model becomes popular: that of the man pursuing sports. Sometimes not even very macho sports: although images of men hunting, wrestling or playing football are widespread, some men take up, for instance, skating. In one of the pictures the audience could see Kornél Jezovics, leader of the Skating Association, sliding gracefully on the frozen Danube.

From this time different types of masculinity appear, among which hegemonic (or toxic or 'macho') masculinity, which is defined in terms of oppressing women and other men, is only one type. In 21st century art men also become the object of gaze and are portrayed as nudes. Beauty myth and body anxieties are getting more and more widespread among men as well. The performative character of masculinity (see Judith Butler's work) is shown by the drag king, and transmasculinity is also included in the various forms of masculinity.

The next lecture was a sharp switch in perspective: **Attila Oláh**, professor at the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology at ELTE University, as well as leader of the Hungarian Psychological Association made it clear that his starting point is the biological sex. He considers an important progress in psychology that by now every publication must dwell on the question whether the results are different in case of men and women. He is also convinced that thinking about sexual differences requires interdisciplinary cooperation.

According to the theory of evolutionary psychology, men and women had to face different challenges in order to survive, thus men's brains developed into a so-called 'systematizing brain', whilst women's brain rather became 'empathic.' Both of them are associated with well-known stereotypes like 'women tend to be more caring and emotional', 'men are rational, tend to repress their feelings and they are aggressive.' The lecturer emphasized that in his view, the problem solving ability of men and women are equally effective, they just find the solution in different ways.

After this Oláh presented recent results of research on the empirical differences between men's and women's cerebral function, attitudes, language use and coping strategies. For example men, in comparison to women, are more likely to emphasize possession in online communities, have a smaller level of emotional intelligence, are less successful in understanding body talk, are more likely to become narcissistic, have a more positive body image, and are more inclined to drug addiction and committing violent crimes or suicide. They suffer from diseases of the heart and the vascular system more often, and their average life expectancy is 4-10 years lower than women's.

The lecturer, with his colleagues, recently carried out a research on different mechanisms of coping with stress. They found that men's psychological immunity, corresponding to international tendencies, is lower than women's. Men typically use problem-focused strategies while they fail to alleviate their emotional distress. Sometimes they are even emotionally incompetent. If they fail to prevail, they are reluctant to co-operate, they are more likely to react with aggression, so they differ from women in terms of emotional control and anger management. Hungarian men are highly motivated in justifying their masculinity – the essence of which they grasp in terms of dominating their environment, standing on their own feet and having a definite goal in life –, but, in their view, they fail to be recognized for it. They interpret it as a disadvantage in the competition, experience frustration and the subsistence of this state leads to the fact that they are „amortized’ earlier. In comparison to women, they experience ‘flow’ less often (in the ‘flow’ state the brain consumes less and performs better).

A member of the audience expressed the opinion that the second lecture reinforces harmful gender stereotypes which hinder gender equality and against which feminism has been struggling. Oláh answered that the results he presented are based on empirical research using a representative sample, and he did not imply the superiority of either problem solving strategy. In fact, he finds it useful if everyone learns both. Furthermore, using the brain can potentially shape the organ, so he does not exclude social-cultural impulses from the analysis.

Hadas thought that he and Oláh come from so different theoretical backgrounds that they can, at best, have a ‘dialogue of the deaf,’ and were he in the present feminists' shoes, he would feel desperate. Some women's rights activists in the audience, however, denied feeling so, and argued that attacking the presented results makes no sense, since they, in themselves, are descriptive and not prescriptive. A crucial question is how we interpret them, for example, if we examine their social origins and the possibilities of change. An agreement was reached in terms of the necessity of (re-)socialization programmes for abusive men. Although such programmes were already launched in some countries, Hadas pointed out that such a possibility is highly dependent on the prevailing views on the origins of violence in the particular society. We also, as Oláh added, bring patterns of conflict solving from our family backgrounds.

Section two, with equally important, but less debated issues, ran more peacefully. Two Hungarian and two foreign experts delivered talks.

András Székely represented the *Three Princes, Three Princesses* movement, which was founded by sociologist Mária Kopp six years ago, aiming at solving a social problem: according to surveys, the number of births is significantly less than the number of desired, planned children. Székely emphasized that – in spite of what their name might suggest – they do not promote big families at any price, they just want to help couples in having the desired number of children (which may be one as well).

He pointed out a contradiction: although Hungarian population is strongly conservative, working in the home is undervalued to such an extent that it is not even called ‘work.’ The everyday way of talking: ‘she does not work, she is at home with the children’ is revolting, although deeply rooted. Székely thinks even feminists aren't conscious enough about it, furthermore, he often catches even himself using this kind of discriminatory language.

He acknowledged that traditional gender roles are not applicable in recent social circumstances. Women cannot be deprived of their right to find fulfilment in working outside the home, and he as a man does not consider washing up as an ‘unmanly’ activity. In his view, every individual should

have the possibility to succeed inside and outside the home. To achieve this, their movement makes an effort to draw men into housework and childcare activities.

Székely, however, thinks it is important to keep mothers' and fathers' roles separate, and he is also convinced that women and men are determined to fulfil different roles. The audience wanted to know what he exactly means about these different roles, but he refused to specify them, arguing that each couple must define them for themselves. He thinks reaching an agreement on gender roles with our partner is even more important than any public poll – and he concluded that ‘we have to find the possible ways in which everyone can become what they want.’

Turning the focus on other countries of the East-Central European region, the next lecturer was **Marek Sammul** from the University of Tartu, Estonia. In 2014 he took part in a state-commissioned project examining Estonian men. Two former surveys were made on Estonian women before, so it was high time to examine men's situation as well, considering the fact that since the '80s several changes have taken place in Estonian men's lives and habits, and gender inequality has increased. Demographic tendencies are similar to those in Hungary: the number of births decreases, women bear their first child later, the number of marriages decreases, domestic partnerships are more typical.

The research focused on questions on health state, education, work, migration and family. One of the most significant results is that men hold family and children important to the same extent as women do. There are no gender differences concerning the desired number of children – just like in Hungary, the majority is in favour of a family with two children. Childless men between 35 and 44 refer, as the main reasons for not having children, to the lack of a suitable partner or economic security.

As for health, 21 percent of men develops stress-related symptoms, and there is an alarming frequency of depression and suicide (or suicide attempt). The main reasons for dissatisfaction are problems related to family, friends or relationship – proving that these are also important for them beside work and financial security. For men in their fifties family and the safety of the home and their children gains an even greater importance.

Answering a question from a member of the audience Sammul told that since in Estonia people begin their independent lives at a young age, men do not tend to expect women to care about them in the home, so the unequal distribution of housework is, in his opinion, not a typical source of the partnership conflicts he mentioned. According to Sammul, hegemonic masculinity or ‘macho’ mentality is not typical of Estonian men. Estonia is a leading country in terms of gender equality, and a possible indicator for this is that 43 percent of the resigning ministers are women.

Michal Uhl is a Member of *the Government Council for Gender Equality* in the Czech Republic. Since 2009 he has been also a member of member of the *Committee (of the gender council) for the Reconciliation of Family and Professional Life*. From his historical overview it turned out that progressive measures in terms of gender equality are not necessarily connected to the left – in the Czech Republic it was during the right-wing government (in coalition with the greens) who contributed to gender equality. The new Prime Minister, Bohuslav Sobotka is a social democrat, in coalition with the populists (oligarchic party) and Christian democrats, and, according to the lecturer he rather seems to be a centrist than a leftist, although he is open to NGOs.

According to *The Government's Strategy for Gender Equality in the Czech Republic 2014 – 2020* the main problems are: 1. low number of men identifying with the agenda of gender equality, 2. men spend less time for the care of children and other loved, 3. low proportion of males as teachers in primary education, 4. low level of attention to problems of men in the health care system (e.g. men have lower life expectancy, higher suicide rates and higher risk of addiction). These problems

are further intensified by men's reluctance to seek medical help, and this reluctance is due to stereotypes of masculine behaviour.

The National Action Plan for Prevention against Domestic Violence regards violent persons (90 percent of whom are men) as victims, as well and introduces re-socialization programs for them. There is a legislative plan involving the voluntary or, if the judge decides so, compulsory participation of violent persons in these therapeutic and rehabilitation programs.

The advisory body called *Government Council for Gender Equality* consists of NGOs and ministerial representatives. One of the NGOs is *The League of Open Men (LOM)*, which takes up a leading role in this council. Their main aims are the development of social conditions of fatherhood, fighting against domestic violence and calling public attention to men's health issues. The government seems to dislike the idea of introducing compulsory parental leave for fathers – which has been highly successful in Sweden –, but according to Uhl, it is pleasurable in itself that the idea was included in the political discourse. He argues that language use is of crucial importance: words like ‘compulsory’ or ‘sanction’ might be alienating.

All in all, he sees some significant improvements in gender policy, and, concerning the recent government, he is optimistic about the switch from a conservative discourse to a liberal-progressive one. There is even a Minister for Human Rights, so he is confident. Czech people are not particularly interested in gender issues, but recent surveys have still shown some improvement in responsiveness to related topics. People, for example, would be in favour of more women in politics. But if the government introduces no measures on this, people don't demand them.

The final lecture was delivered by **Balázs Böcskei** (ELTE University, Budapest), who harshly criticized everyday sexism in the public sphere and politics, as well as the mistaken approach that sexism is exclusively a women's issue, and only women have to speak out against it. In his opinion, we should address male politicians with the problem – he mentioned seeing some of them in the audience, but, typically, not the ones who would need to hear the lectures the most. He thinks all male politicians should take part in a training called ‘How to avoid being sexist.’

In his opinion politicians usually do know what should be done in order to achieve gender equality, and if it seems advantageous for them, they even tend to make promises about such measures. They are also ready to acknowledge that the recent political atmosphere is disadvantageous for women, but are less willing to make actual changes. Women politicians are allowed to deal only with ‘soft’ issues. The problem is further intensified by the fact that loyalty to the party is more crucial to promotion than expertise and aptitude. Male politicians tend to be essentialist (voicing opinions like e.g. ‘women are more disciplined’). Women are put up as a candidate only if the party is lacking a male applicant.

Böcskei believes that only a slow, gradual change is possible, although he is aware that most feminists desire a radical one. We can, however, expect from the present male political elite merely a so-called ‘progressive chivalry’, which means that they may be willing to surrender some of their privileges motivated by politeness, by a kind of benevolent sexism – and only ‘if we keep them under a constant dialogue.’