

The road to success for Hungarian women in the Serbian higher education system

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Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to analyze the position of women members of the Hungarian ethnic minority in the higher education system of Serbia, based on available statistical data, the legal framework and interviews conducted in multiethnic Vojvodina, i.e. the northern province of Serbia.

The analysis will focus on women students who study in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields in Novi Sad.

This paper is also based on five semi-structured interviews, as a pilot project, for collecting qualitative data from Hungarian women studying in STEM fields at the University of Novi Sad (UNS). The primary interviewee selection criteria was (1) Hungarian origin, (2) elementary and high school education completed in the Hungarian language, and (3) studying in a STEM field of study. The interviews focused on five focus points, namely (1) childhood inter-ethnic conflicts, (2) obstacles faced at the university, (3) family and career, (4) gender segregation at the university and (5) their opinions about Hungarian women taking on research/teaching, and/or leading positions at the STEM faculties of the UNS.



Interviews with students

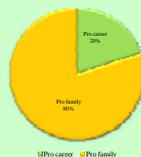
Five semi-structured interviews were conducted on the basis of pre-set survey questions. In the first part of the interview the interviewees were asked to tell their short biography, and the second part of the interviews focused on the following 11 areas:

- (1) Language barrier effect on studies and/or work.
- (2) Influential professor(s).
- (3) Number of languages they had writing skills;
- (4) Whether they attend/teach classes in Hungarian
- (5) Harmonization of career and family
- (6) Ambition to reach leading roles in academia.
- (7) Can Hungarians reach leadership positions?
- (8) Why they chose a career in science?
- (9) Any scholarship received from Hungary?
- (10) Modern tongue and brain drain
- (11) How to steer women towards STEM studies?

The interviews five focus points showed:

- (1) Although the interviewees experienced **inter-ethnic conflicts** during their childhood which made and impact on their self-esteem, however they did not face such difficulties during their studies.
- (2) All of the interviewees had to overcome the **language barrier** at the beginning of their studies. One of the interviewees, still struggles when she has to speak in Serbian.
- (3) Four from five women stated that their **family is more important than their career** – one interviewee said that earning her PhD is her priority in life.

Family vs Career



- (4) All interviewees experience some form of **gender segregation** at their departments, although they study in the STEM field of studies. Only one of the interviewees studies at a typically „male department” (i.e. Computing and Control Engineering), where there are only three women (less than 5% of the total students).
- (5) All five interviewees stated that Hungarian women can **reach leadership positions in academia**, even at the STEM faculties. One interviewee stated that because of her language barrier she has less self-esteem and also has to work harder to prove her scientific valor than her male colleagues.

The results of the interview show that **the situation is black-and-white, with notable contradictions**, e.g. all the interviewees claim that Hungarian women can reach leadership positions in academia, while at the same time they are all aware of gender segregation at their departments.

Proposed measures

Clearing the language barrier, which can be achieved by the foundation of the University of Subotica in the Northern part of Vojvodina, where courses would be held in the Hungarian language. Now there is one department and one additional chair at the UNS teaching in Hungarian.

More significant women enrollment at the STEM departments of the UNS could be stimulated by the introduction of university quotas for women enrolling at faculties from the STEM fields.

The fight against stereotypes de-motivating women from entering the STEM fields and taking on leading positions in academia must continue. The qualitative analysis presented in this paper showed that Hungarian women have moderate ambitions, and that they would gladly sacrifice their careers for their family. A possible solution for overcoming these stereotypes could be the introduction of gender sensitive teaching in schools, as well as gender sensitive books.



Legal framework

The constitution, laws and regulations, literature and other collected data were analyzed with the critical reading method.

The results of the legal framework analysis are:

- ✓ The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006) is modern and has the necessary elements (citizens are equal, etc.)
- ✓ The Law on the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities (2009) grants national minorities the right to education in their mother tongue.
- ✓ The Anti-Discrimination Act (2009) prohibits discrimination against national minorities on the basis of nationality, ethnic origin, religious beliefs, and language.
- ✓ The Higher Education Act (2005) states that a higher education institutions may organize degree programs in minority or foreign languages.
- ✗ The Strategy for the Development of the Education System of Serbia Until 2020 (2012) does not mention gender equality!

Conclusions

Laws and regulations in Serbia guarantee the same rights to the minorities as to the majority nation, with limited positive discrimination in some social aspects. Most of the students from the Hungarian minority can not continue their higher education in their mother tongue, as there is only one faculty organizing studies in Hungarian.

Based on the qualitative analysis of the data gathered during the interviews, it was shown that Hungarian women have less self-esteem when entering the academic society in Serbia, partly because of the inter-ethnic conflicts they experienced in their childhood and partly because of their limited knowledge of the majority's language (i.e. Serbian). Due to these limitations, women of Hungarian origin often drop out, go to study abroad and rarely manage to obtain either researcher and/or teaching positions at the UNS.

Those women who enroll and finish their studies at the UNS have to work more than members of the majority nation, they first have to overcome the language barrier and only then can they focus entirely on their studies and building their careers.

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