

Counterstrategies against Antifeminism: Academia Meets Practice

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ABSTRACT: Based on examples of antifeminist and anti-»genderist« attacks against scholars in Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies (WGFS) as well as practitioners and activists, this paper proposes relevant counterstrategies. After briefly outlining the characteristics of current antifeminist and anti-»genderist« discourses, we share our own experiences with such attacks. We discuss criticisms of and defamations against WGFS inside academia, antifeminist interventions in journalistic public spheres and difficulties encountered in collaborations between WGFS scholars and activists. From our experiences, we derive seven suggestions for strategies which WGFS could utilize to counter attacks in a transdisciplinary, intersectional way.

KEYWORDS: *antifeminism; counterstrategies; Gender Studies*

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Introduction

As a new and critical field of research, from the start, the academic field of Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies (WGFS)¹ has struggled with institutionalization and has frequently been challenged by various actors and movements, in German-speaking countries and elsewhere.

These challenges are directed against the predominant impetus of WGFS: to critically engage with hegemonic gender relations, gender hierarchies and gendered power relations in society. The political aim is ending discrimination against women² and other non-hegemonic genders and gender identities. The accusations mainly refer to two aspects: the alleged political or ideological character of WGFS, which is said to lack scientificity; and the term *gender*, which allegedly neglects the biological fact of sex as binary, and supposedly contributes to destroying the »normal« (cis-heteronormative) family. In addition to feminist activism, Gender Studies scholars who see themselves as feminists have aimed to conduct research for marginalized and subaltern groups. Feminist research aimed at both giving a voice to and improving the situation of marginalized women and other »Others«. There is an ongoing debate on whether and to what extent WGFS research should engage with particular political fields or social activism (Hark 2005). Last but not least, there are attacks

against WGFS from self-declared »gender-critical« feminists who aspire to a feminism that excludes certain subjects and topics.³ While »gender-critical« feminism is noteworthy because it opens feminist doors to the political right, it will not be discussed in this paper. Instead, this paper presents a follow-up elaboration of an expert discussion at the conference »Troubling Gender«, which featured Dorothee Beck, Sabine Grenz, Eszter Kováts, Juliane Lang and Ilse Lenz and which was moderated by Marion Näser-Lather (Näser-Lather et al. 2021).

We analyze backgrounds and influential factors concerning challenges and attacks in different social fields in Germany and Austria: the political sphere, the academic community and journalistic media. We outline difficulties in countering attacks, and we point out counterstrategies. We discuss how WGFS scholars might react to these confrontations and how they can collaborate with activists.

Counterstrategies are in themselves a form of activism. However, we do not only reflect on the conflictual relation between academia and practice. Rather, we also look beyond the academic field to discuss the zones of conflict outlined above. In this sense, we regard transdisciplinarity as a discursive and practical exchange between academia and practice (understood as other than academic bodies of knowledge). Hence, we do not follow a hierarchical understanding of knowledge but rather aim for an exchange on equal terms. Additionally, since the authors of this paper have different disciplinary backgrounds (European Ethnology, Gender Studies, Political Science and Sociology), we write in a both trans- and interdisciplinary research context.

Our paper is divided into three sections. We begin by briefly contextualizing antifeminist and anti-»gender«⁴ discourses and analyzing their background as well as the contested institutionalization of Gender Studies within academia. In the following part, we discuss four arenas relevant to antifeminist/anti-»genderist« attacks against WGFS researchers, practitioners and activists and their effects on WGFS: first, the antifeminist devaluation of gender research by self-declared »experts« on WGFS from within academia from different disciplinary backgrounds; second, antifeminist/anti-»genderist« articles, editorials etc. in leading print media; third, engaging with Gender Studies students on the topic of antifeminist attacks; and, fourth, feminist activism. In the last section, we propose inter- and transdisciplinary measures and strategies which can help to counter such attacks.

Contexts: Anti-»genderism« and antifeminism in wider society and academia

Positions against feminism, women's rights, »gender« and/or the denormalization of heteronormative gender relations have been articulated by a spectrum of actors from Christian fundamentalist to conservative and right-wing extremist circles in different European countries since the 1990s and have gained popularity since the beginning of the current millennium. In their discourses, Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies (WGFS), gender mainstreaming, gender equality policies and gender-inclusive language are constantly being conflated as well as challenged and devalued (cf. Hark/Villa 2015; Lang/Peters 2018; Näser-Lather et al. 2019; Henninger/Birsl 2020).

There has been some debate regarding whether such discourses and movements should be called *anti-genderism* or *antifeminism* (e.g., Hark/Villa 2015; Paternotte/Kuhar 2017). For example, Maihofer and Schutzbach (2015) argue that these discourses and efforts go beyond pure antifeminism because they simultaneously target the struggle against the leveling of the gender gap, the acceptance of homosexuality and (Muslim) migration. Howev-

er, following the argument outlined in the introduction to the edited volume *Backlash?! Antifeminismus in Wissenschaft, Politik und Gesellschaft* (Näser-Lather et al. 2019), we prefer to call this phenomenon *antifeminism* (Kemper 2012; Kemper 2014; Scheele 2016; Lang/Peters 2018; Lang/Fritzsche 2018) to avoid taking up the term *genderism* as a polemical political slogan that was coined primarily by right-wing actors (cf. Rosenbrock 2012, 116; Lang/Fritzsche 2018). Furthermore, our concept of feminism refers to an understanding of an intersectional movement that aims for the abolition of regimes of domination around gender, gender identities and/or gender roles and that includes perspectives on sexuality as well as racialized and classed power structures (Kurz-Scherf 2002, 44; Lang/Fritzsche 2018, 340; Lenz 2019). Therefore, in this paper, antifeminism is understood as discourses and activities directed against intersectional feminist aspirations and achievements. Antifeminism can be defined as »an ideological counter-movement immanent to the respective historical process of emancipation, universalism, socio-political liberalization and denormalization of gender relations« (Birsl 2018, unpublished manuscript).

The struggle for emancipation is not only an issue of wider society. Rather, academia, being a part of society, is one of the fields of conflict and therefore could be aligned with other forms of activism in other social areas. For instance, the underrepresentation of women professors – they make up only one quarter of all professors in Germany and Austria – provides evidence for the claim of gender inequality in academia. Additionally, the weak institutionalization of Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies (WGFS) as well as the skepticism with which gender scholars are frequently confronted are further indicators of androcentrism and sexism.

WGFS have developed as an interdisciplinary field since the 1970s and brought about an immense body of literature and academic structures. Gender courses, positions in academia, regular academic conferences, awards etc. have been established. Hence, »WGFS has become [...] an academic institution in itself, one which is more or less (inter)disciplinary [...] and autonomous and has its own structures of creation and validation of knowledge and its canonical but contested narratives about what its objects, boundaries, aims and histories are, or should be« (Pereira 2017, 29). These structures form a »post-discipline« (Lykke 2010), an innovative academic field that creates new standards for collaboration as well as new forms of intellectual engagements with feminists' own tradition building (van der Tuin 2009; Hemmings 2011; Liinason 2011). This has been accompanied by ongoing lively and controversial debates about the conflictual relation between academic research and political activism (Schindler 2005; Villa/Speck 2020).

Nevertheless, it is a field that until today is less institutionalized than others and, as a result, is structurally and financially disadvantaged (Kahlert 2018). Furthermore, although the field of Gender Studies is officially supported in Germany by several academic institutions such as the Federal Ministry for Education and Research, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft⁵ and most recently the German Science and Humanities Council,⁶ the relevance of gender-related research and teaching continues to be questioned in universities (Marx/Kotlenga 2017, 13; 18). Hence, WGFS enjoys a lower epistemic status in academia than other fields (Pereira 2017). Scholars and their research are frequently reproached for being »too political« or »ideologically stained« (cf. Pereira 2017; Grenz 2023). This is partly related to the political implications of research on inequality more generally. It is further linked to the transdisciplinarity of several areas of research in WGFS such as research on violence against women, which seek social and political change. To some academics, cooperating with practitioners in academic knowledge production conflicts with their hierarchical understanding of knowledge, which ascribes more validity to academic knowl-

edge production than other bodies of knowledge. Additionally, it is sometimes assumed that WGFS research projects subordinate the research process to political goals and that they are thus biased and lacking openness to results. Other reasons for negative attitudes towards WGFS include simple sexism and, last but not least, the fact that WGFS scholars question mainstream modes of knowledge production from an intersectional gender perspective. This scrutiny has revealed the mostly hidden partiality and positionality as well as neglected aspects in research. It has also led to the development of new epistemologies and methodologies that have the potential to transform academia (e.g., Ernst 1999; Richardson 2010; Schiebinger 1999).

WGFS research intends to make academic research more inclusive. For instance, in Literary Studies, feminist research critically reflects on androcentric, heteronormative and Western canons. In the field of History, WGFS approaches aim at making women, queer, trans and intersex persons in history more visible, among other things, through a focus on everyday history. In Religious Studies, they interrogate everyday religion in the context of patriarchal official religions and make androcentric and Western research biases visible. By questioning mainstream epistemologies and methodologies as well as arguing for an encompassing inclusion of marginalized positionalities, feminist and gender researchers have been activists in academia themselves. In the current situation in which WGFS research is more institutionalized and has developed its own structures, the political relevance of all knowledge production is recognized and connected to issues of responsibility in doing research as well as teaching and statements in the public sphere.

Yet, as we learn from Tanja Paulitz (2010), WGFS is not the first academic field that had to struggle for acceptance by established academics and their fields. For instance, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Engineering Sciences, as a then new scientific field, also had difficulties proving their academic status. The knowledge on which the new field drew came from technical areas and was seen as being too technical to be academic. Tanja Paulitz (2010) traces negotiation processes around hegemonic masculinity involved in the establishment of and challenges to Engineering Sciences as a struggle of the traditional academic against the engineer. One could argue that here, too, transdisciplinarity as well as the applicability of knowledge led to skepticism. This example clearly shows that epistemic struggles are not only about criticism and interrogation as a normal feature of academic discourse in which positions that are criticized are simultaneously recognized as being part of that discourse; rather, epistemic struggles constitute *power* struggles in the context of which the ability to participate in this discourse is challenged by denying a discipline its scientificity, i.e., its ability to speak. This is particularly true in relation to WGFS because WGFS scrutinizes male, heteronormative, racial and other biases.

Examples: Coping with anti-»gender«/antifeminist claims inside and outside of academia

Example 1: Instrumentalizing the weak institutionalization of Gender Studies

The so-called »gender hoax« by Peter Boghossian, James A. Lindsay and Helen Pluckrose has become famous among antifeminists. The three hoaxers spent a year inventing studies in the field of WGSF and, thus, cheating journals focused on different areas of discrimination. They managed to place one of their fake studies in *Gender, Place and Culture*, which sparked a public response that partly questioned WGFS as a valid field of research. Com-

paring this reaction to responses to fraudulent articles in natural scientific journals such as papers about the creation of stem cells and a causal relationship between vaccination and autism, the stark difference is obvious. Whereas in these (and other cases), the scientists who published such articles are seen as deceiving the journal as well as the peer reviewers and the academic community as a whole, the hoax in *Gender, Place and Culture* was taken by some as proof of WGFS's lack of scholarliness. However, Boghossian's employer, Portland States University, made it clear that such acts of deception are no trivial offense by disciplining him for violating research ethics.

Attacks against WGFS from within academia by scholars from a variety of disciplines also exist in Germany. Marion Näser-Lather examined them in a case study as part of the interdisciplinary project REVERSE (»Crisis of gender relations? Antifeminism as a threat to social integration«) at the Center for Gender Studies and Feminist Future Research at Philipps-Universität Marburg (2017–2019). In her study on »anti-genderist« argumentations in academic contexts«, Näser-Lather analyzed texts by scholars who position themselves against »gender«. In publications, interviews and lectures, anti-»genderist« academics devalue WGFS as unscholarly and demonize WGFS as a danger to society. They do not take note of the current state of research and the heterogeneity of the interdisciplinary field of Gender Studies, but rather present it in a generalizing and distorting way, citing only a fraction of often older publications. They equate Gender Studies with neglecting the materiality of the body and abolishing gender identity. As social consequences, they imagine, among other things, the decline of moral values and the threat to the »normal« family. They impute a »radical constructivism« as the central approach of Gender Studies and accuse the field of being unscientific, driven by a political agenda, and preventing open-ended research. Importantly, in doing so, some of them utilize unscholarly strategies of argumentation themselves, such as distorted or false representations, conspiracy narratives, ad hominem attacks and false conclusions (Näser-Lather 2020). What makes these attacks concerning not only for academic freedom but also for democracy in general is the fact that they can be – and are! – used in the mainstreaming of right-wing extremist positions.

From the very beginning, the REVERSE project caught the attention of antifeminist actors and media, including *Sciencefiles*, a right-wing blog co-edited by Heike Diefenbach, one of the academics whose publications were examined in Näser-Lather's study. This blog launched a shitstorm against the REVERSE project and its team, disparaging its approach as well as claiming that the research was biased and that some of the team members had gained their positions through corruption. Furthermore, the right-wing extremist party *Alternative for Germany* (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) submitted a parliamentary inquiry to the German Bundestag about the project. One of the study's findings was that academics attacking WGFS are noticed primarily in right-wing and Christian-fundamentalist publics and that some of them, including Diefenbach, also participate in corresponding networks.

Diefenbach sued Näser-Lather for publishing the findings above. Even though she lost the case, this incident demonstrates the need for protecting researchers as well as developing strategies for coping with such attacks. Universities and their legal departments are the first points of reference in such cases. However, Philipps-Universität Marburg initially treated these attacks as a private issue of the academics involved. It was only later, after repeated interventions by the principal investigator of the REVERSE project, that the university administration realized the importance of the case for academic freedom and decided to lend their symbolic support. However, Näser-Lather had to find a lawyer outside the university and, as a consequence, felt, at first, left alone in this stressful situation. This experience shows that much work is still necessary regarding the sensitization of university

administrations and training for universities' legal departments. Thankfully, Näser-Lather received declarations of solidarity from both the German and the Austrian societies for European Ethnology.

Critically engaging with research results and individual scholarly work in the field of WGFS is productive and legitimate. However, academics who position themselves against »gender« frequently articulate pseudo facts about WGFS or criticize the field in general, without engaging with specific scholarly work. They are rarely experts on gender research, but, as members of an academic community, form part of an institutional field that provides them with symbolic capital and, hence, enables them to gain discursive power in the public. This is particularly true in the aforementioned conservative and religious publics, but, as we show in the next section, also reaches beyond these fields into mainstream society. While two of the ten authors examined in Näser-Lather's study also published their criticism and attacks in academic publications, most of their texts consisted of (guest) articles in mainstream conservative newspapers such as *Die Welt* and in right-wing and religious »alternative media« (Näser-Lather 2020). Faced with this situation, Näser-Lather deemed it necessary to challenge them, since their argumentations did not take place in a closed intra-academic conversation, in the proverbial »ivory tower«, having practically no influence on the public. Rather, their texts and public lectures are a discursive bridge that can mobilize parts of the public to take a position against developments which we consider desirable, such as the denormalization of heteronormative gender relations and LGBTIQ+ rights. This impact of antifeminist scholars on certain sub-publics as well as potential reactions are also illustrated by the following examples.

Example 2: Interventions in print news media

As mentioned above, antifeminist scholars publish essays and statements in mainstream print media and, hence, address a broader public. In her study on »Genderism in Media Debate. Thematic Cycles from 2006 to 2016«⁷ (Beck 2020), Dorothee Beck analyzed such media discourses referring to different issues concerning the term »gender«. The main findings were that, first, conservative or liberal media only referred to WGFS in a positive and serious way in relation to issues such as women's heart attack risks. Academic research by more activist networks (e.g., about antifeminism of the far right) was hardly acknowledged, and if so, then usually as an expression of a political opinion. Second, media outlets mostly did not engage with current academic discourse themselves when publishing on WGFS, gender-related issues or gender-inclusive language. Instead, they invited guest authors such as academics and politicians, many of whom fit into the political tendency of the respective outlet, in order to support their own perspective on gender issues. Hence, and third, in antifeminist and anti-»genderist« discourses (and probably in other discourses as well), news media did not merely act as the Fourth Power, providing an impartial and critical view »from outside« as a form of control of political powers. Rather, they set their own agenda and participated in these discourses as actors on their own account (Beck 2020).

Media articles critical of gender issues predominantly lacked seriousness. The authors did not seriously engage with WGFS research results and gender-inclusive language but ridiculed both in an abstract way (ibid.). Some print media, conservative or liberal, implicitly or explicitly blamed women for an alleged crisis of masculinity. They supported hegemonic masculine values and heteronormative gender hierarchies. Some even served as platforms for male supremacists or took up male supremacist narratives and arguments themselves. In doing so, they supported male resovereigning (Forster 2006) and helped build discursive

bridges to antifeminist political positions (cf. Beck 2021a; Beck 2021b)⁸. Hence, in the discussion on some topics, the majority of positions presented were male supremacist ones, including in readers' comments on media websites, even though masculism represents only a tiny, extremely loud minority of men in society as a whole (cf. Rosenbrock 2012; Beck 2021b).

The problem of anti-»genderist« media pieces continues to exist after the conclusion of Beck's study in 2016. Conservative newspapers and tabloids in particular continue to unite in the defamation and devaluation of WGFS, claiming that the field lacks scholarly seriousness and relevance and accusing it of engaging in political lobbying disguised as academic work, of being ideological and, thus, a waste of research funds, etc. Relatedly, there is a constant stream of derogatory comments on WGFS and gender-inclusive language, subsuming both topics under the unifying accusation unintelligibility. Gender-inclusive language is accused of constituting linguistic barbarism, concealing the cultural heritage of the German language, incomprehensibility and political instrumentalization, as well as restricting freedom of speech.⁹ Similarly, Gender Studies is accused of using a hermetic language.¹⁰ As these examples show, accusations are often brought forward in the context of discourses about »political correctness«, »wokeness«, and »cancel culture« (e.g., Schubert 2020; Cammermerts 2022; Beck 2024).

At the same time, liberal left and left-leaning media have changed their attitude towards WGFS, WGFS topics and gender-inclusive language. In the 1980s, the left-wing newspaper *die tageszeitung* was an early pioneer in using gender-inclusive language. In recent years, other newspapers such as *Frankfurter Rundschau* set up rules for gender-inclusiveness in their articles.¹¹ Additionally, some well-known presenters of TV magazines such as *heute journal* (ZDF), *Aspekte* (ZDF) and the comedy show *ZDF-Magazin Royale* regularly use gender-inclusive language. The range of political positions in the media on topics related to sexual diversity, LGBTIQ+ matters and diversity-oriented sex education has also widened significantly (Beck 2024). These examples show that gender issues are being taken more seriously, which in turn means that collaboration with the media can be a way for counterstrategies against anti-»genderist« discourses to succeed: after years of attacks on WGFS and gender-inclusive language, there are certain media and media actors who are allies to WGFS scholars in the discourse on WGFS and gender-inclusive language.

Example 3: Making attacks a subject for teaching and public academic events

One example for a functioning cooperation between academics and journalists comes from an interview in the newspaper *Der Standard*, which was published in 2017 when Sabine Grenz took office as professor for interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Vienna. The journalist Beate Hausbichler interviewed her about the objectives of gender research more generally as well as about her own work (Grenz/Hausbichler 2017). Very quickly, nearly 700 comments were posted in response to the interview on *Der Standard's* online forum. Compared to the usual 35 comments per article, this is an extraordinary number. Since most of the postings positioned themselves against WGFS, the forum's reaction seems to be an example of online coordination among men's rights and anti-»gender« activists as described by Rosenbrock (2012). Consistently, commenters rejected the need for gender research, voicing assumptions that there was no discrimination against women anymore, that men and women simply had different natures and that sexism had long been overcome.

The interview was published in the »Science and Humanities« section of the newspaper. Interestingly, and supporting the findings in Beck's »genderism«-study, this was taken

up by many postings, with commenters stating that gender research was unscholarly and, thus, a waste of taxpayers' money and resources. They also made use of academic terms such as »objectivity« but used them in a way that lacked academic differentiation. Overall, their understanding of scholarly methodology and output was very limited (Köhnen 2014). They argued from a pseudo-neutral position in order to disguise their own political interests and authoritarian gestures. As Juliane Lang argues, such an understanding is widespread among opponents of WGFS (Näser-Lather et al. 2021). However, commenters often referred to hearsay and alleged common sense, indicating that they lacked reliable knowledge about the field. All in all, their comments also resonate with our arguments above regarding the low epistemic status of WGFS within academia (cf. Pereira 2017). On this basis, they create links to more mainstream thinking about WGFS.

The distorted perceptions of academic research evident in these comments are not only problematic for researchers but can be unsettling for students. Such attacks can put students off studying Gender Studies. They contribute to the fact that Gender Studies students are frequently questioned about choosing their specific subject. For this reason, Grenz taught a research class on »anti-genderism« in which students conducted a discourse analysis of the entire body of postings. Their analysis centered on the following questions: Who speaks in this forum? What or who is silenced? What is portrayed as absurd/uncanny? How did the commenters construct their authority to judge? Their findings were that a few commenters wrote most comments and that most defined themselves as men. Those commenters indicated a belief that discrimination against women has been overcome; other forms of gender discrimination were not really on their horizon. In addition, the commenters did not know what gender research is about and their goal very obviously was to silence other perspectives. The experience of conducting this analysis was empowering for the students: while they occasionally felt insecure reading the statements at first, they were able to deconstruct them in the end.

It was even more empowering for them that Beate Hausbichler, the journalist who had conducted the interview, continued the cooperation and wrote an article about the results of this research.¹² The students were thrilled and motivated.

Interestingly, this article gained even more comments (about 2,000). One of the reasons might be that the article mentioned one observation of this study on the interview: pro-WGFS interview statements were only posted in response to negative comments but not in order to initiate new threads. Clearly, some pro-WGFS activists took this up and started threads in reaction to the second article by commenting directly on the importance of gender research. Although this provoked even more counterstatements from anti-»gender« activists, it did effect a slight change in the discourse.

In addition to teaching, public academic events give opportunity to raise the issue of attacks on gender research. For example, the research network *Gender and Agency*¹³ at the University of Vienna organized a series of talks to enhance the relationship between media and academia. For one slot, Hausbichler and Grenz were invited for a discussion on this case.

Example 4: Transdisciplinary cooperation

Besides academic communication, cooperation with journalists and teaching, transdisciplinary collaboration with activists or even acting as activists can be a way for WGFS scholars to counter antifeminist discourses and attacks. In the following section, we examine conditions and modes of collaboration and intervention from an intersectional perspective.

As already mentioned, there is a link between academic and activist feminisms as well as feminist practitioners in various social fields. This form of transdisciplinarity is both historical and still relevant (cf. Hark 2005; Hemmings 2011). As a result, we can see a constant debate about and (re-)negotiation of transdisciplinarity by which academic knowledge is generated, applied, discussed and/or (re-)evaluated in different social and political fields and their bodies of knowledge.

The disciplinary perspective from which WGFS scholars speak, of course, influences positionings concerning the question of activist engagement of WGFS researchers (see Villa/Speck 2020). For example, in Anthropology and European Ethnology, the question of whether intervening in the field should be considered an option or even obligation for researchers has been discussed at length. Positions have ranged from the emphasis on the freedom of value judgment and the neutrality of science (e.g., D'Andrade 1995; Heimerdinger 2017) to the moral obligation to stand up for human rights (Scheper-Hughes 1995; Ong 1995) or the advocacy of an engaged anthropology, which aims to support partners in the field, e.g., through collaboration or activism (Binder/Hess 2013). According to the minutes of the conference at Falkenstein 1970 (Brückner 1971), the aim of European Ethnology should be »to participate in solving socio-cultural problems« (ibid., 303; our translation). Kaspar Maase even questions the legitimacy of research that does not meet this perceived obligation (Maase 1999: XIII). In contrast, Hamm (2013), in reflecting on dual positions as researcher and activist, regards the role of intervening researcher in her own case as presumptuous. She argues against participatory, action-oriented research and in favor of dialogic ethnography. Like all ethical issues regarding field research, this question calls for case-by-case solutions.

While there is an ongoing academic discourse about intervening in the field of research, political and professional groups may have high expectations regarding WGFS. Equal opportunities commissioners working in local administrations are responsible for the implementation of equal opportunities laws. However, some of them are »lone fighters« without a team, and some only have a few spare hours per week available beside their »normal« work in public administration. Unsurprisingly, they are strongly interested in counterstrategies against antifeminism or arguments for the introduction of gender-inclusive language in administrative communication. Yet, they often do not find solidarity. In some local authorities, antifeminist arguments or even attacks are reproduced without opposition. Sometimes this is because equal opportunities policies require funding that others seek to claim for other issues. Equal opportunities commissioners are attacked in local media or on social media (Juraschek 2023). They appreciate it, when these offenses are acknowledged and contextualized politically or academically so they can recognize (and internalize) the fact that these attacks are not their individual problems, but form part of a larger political struggle. Thus, WGFS could and should provide background information, arguments, and feminist solidarity.¹⁴

WGFS scholars appear in fields dealing with antifeminism as actors with a variety of simultaneous, intertwined roles and can articulate different critiques in these positions: as researchers committed to methodological norms, as scholars cooperating with activists, as activists in academia or as feminist activists in movements. This latter role, in fact, is quite different from their role as scholars. Researchers can contribute their academic knowledge about antifeminism and feminism in cases of attacks or exclusions. Scholars can cooperate with activists according to the latter's needs. They can cooperate in events or launch joint research projects; they can provide access to international scholarly networks, to the media or to politicians. For instance, in research on migration, it may be fruitful to be in touch with migrant feminist groups in the region, which tend to be invisible or stereotyped, as well as

consider engaging in joint research on their aims and the limitations they face. To give an example, since 2022, Ilse Lenz has been cooperating with a transnational group in Berlin to gain justice for »comfort women«: women who were forced to provide sexual services to Japanese soldiers in camps in World War II. The group erected a statue to protest sexual violence in war and to commemorate the »comfort women« (Mladenova 2022). The Japanese government demanded its removal, but the group succeeded in their protest, relying, among others, on international support from Southeast Asia and Japan.

Activism in academia means supporting the formation of intra-university alliances and sensitizing university administrations to struggles over gender. On a more basic level, it is also about working for equality and anti-discrimination in the academic system, including, for example, working against the hegemony of the majority position via quotas for marginalized groups. Of course, scholars can directly participate in activism. The design and agreement of the roles of researcher and activist and the extent to which they can be separated is the subject of long-standing debates. In our view, however, the ideal (which we are aware is unattainable, but which we nevertheless want to strive for) should be the separation of analysis and positioning. It may therefore be advisable in individual cases to make clear whether one is speaking from a researcher's or an activist's position. Additionally, when antifeminist or anti-»gender« events take place at universities, scholars can take a stance and organize parallel events.¹⁵

Solidarity and mobilization can emerge due to manifold experiences of vulnerability and violence. However, possible barriers between academia and practice exist, resulting from different language logics and uses. Additionally, differences in the intersectional positioning of academics and activists make relations between the two groups complex. However, relations can change, for example by working on conflicts; this can be conceptualized as processual intersectionality (cf. Lenz 2019). Scholars are always involved in conflicts in many ways in their efforts to do engaged research and to intervene publicly; their own position is complex when it comes to questions of solidarity. They should act in solidarity (especially with racialized groups, women, as well as queer, trans and intersex people) while reflecting on their own diverse positions in the culture of dominance.

Strategies for the struggle against anti-»gender«/antifeminist activism in and beyond academia

In this paper, we pursue the interrelated questions of what can be done to counter anti-»gender« activism and how we can cooperate with practitioners and activists in different fields, as well as how we can work inter- and transdisciplinarily to further these goals. We have considered four arenas: academia itself, its relation to the media, teaching, and relations between academia and activism. In our final part, we draw on these examples and the ongoing discussions in the field in order to propose a structured approach consisting of seven suggestions for strategies regarding academic communication, journalistic and social media, academic teaching and the academic system, as well as concepts for defending ourselves and our research against attacks.

1. Unmasking antifeminism as a reactionary and undemocratic ideology

Above all, we should continue to act as Women's, Gender and Feminist Studies scholars, i.e., analyzing antifeminist actors, contexts, intentions and effects on regional, national

and international levels as well as from an intersectional perspective. We should reveal the de-democratizing effects of an ideology that regards »gender« as a biological, natural or God-given fact. The effect of such an ideology is not only a hierarchical gender binary, but also a denial of the existence as well as the right to exist of people whose gender identity goes beyond the binary. We have good arguments against the racist and transphobic character of antifeminism, above all because this ideology limits gender-based and sexualized violence to specific persons without regarding structures. Male Muslim or Black »Others« are suspected as perpetrators, while the widespread gender-based violence in our societies is neglected (Bergold-Caldwell/Grubner 2020). LGBTIQ+ people are imputed to destroy »normal« families (Mayer et al. 2020). Trans women are accused of actually being men and of threatening »real« women (Klapeer/Nüthen 2024). There is a rich body of feminist scholarly work about antifeminism. And there are more research questions waiting to be elaborated.

2. Teaching in higher education

We need to include the issue of antifeminism into our teaching and discuss it with our students. Some might simply be insecure about their work in the field, but others are affected by antifeminist lobbying. Together, we can analyze and deconstruct antifeminist statements. Not only is it an empowering process in which students recognize the poor argumentation of antifeminists. Students will be better able to counter such arguments wherever they are confronted with them. Also, they can become proactive actors. Cases that might be discussed with students include the double standard in the (public) evaluation of WGFS, e.g., taking the example of the hoax by Boghossian, Lindsay and Pluckrose who were celebrated for »revealing« the supposedly low standard of gender research. In addition, we can include topics such as science communication, engaging with the media, and protection concepts such as the one proposed here in our teaching.

3. Institutionalization of interdisciplinary gender research

In academia in general, we should continue to work for a better institutionalization of WGFS. This is necessary within individual universities, since within many institutions, gender research is not sufficiently visible. However, better institutionalization is also necessary in funding bodies. For instance, as has been frequently discussed, institutions such as the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft could introduce an interdisciplinary review board with adequate funding for interdisciplinary Gender Studies for which, for instance, an intersectional gender focus is a criterion for quality in research. Currently, research proposals with a gender focus compete with other proposals in established academic disciplines. As a result, gender research has to be conceptualized within these disciplines in order to be successful, whereas interdisciplinary research faces difficulties in acceptance – this applies to other interdisciplinary fields as well. Additionally, we should strive to establish appropriate working conditions: fighting precarity in academia in order to enable us to establish long-term research cooperations as well as collaborations with activists. For this purpose, solidarity that crosses disciplinary boundaries is essential.

4. Protection concepts for research on sensitive topics

We need to establish protection mechanisms against hate speech, silencing and other anti-feminist efforts. Additionally, we should act in solidarity with persons and groups under

attack while at the same time retaining a self-critical, self-reflexive, postcolonial and trans- and intersectional perspective in order to gain insight into and deconstruct the complexity of power relations.

More concretely, the REVERSE research group developed a protection concept which aims to improve reactions to such attacks and to minimize emotional stress for the persons attacked. The concept entails the following points:

- A risk assessment should be conducted, if possible, before a project is initiated. It should consider the characteristics of the field which the project plans to investigate, what reactions to the research can be expected, and what precautionary measures should be taken, e.g., asking how the contact options on the project homepage should be designed to reduce the risk of stalking.
- When attacks occur, emotional detachment is necessary, i.e., using strategies for distancing oneself and reflecting on one's own emotional affectedness. The person affected should not react immediately to the attacks and should not respond to attackers directly or on their platforms and media. This is because in most cases, they are not interested in dialogue and will use the response for further attacks. In order to differentiate between the relationship to the field and the content of the attack, the person affected should not enter into non-academic discourse; they should not react affectively to what is affectively charged.
- Constant documentation and archiving of the attacks is important. However, documentation should be performed by those not directly affected, e.g., other team members, colleagues, etc.
- Continuous communication with the team and/or supporters is necessary to stay up to date on current developments.
- Support should be sought as early as possible. This includes institutional support by the legal department and the administration of the university/research organization as well as by professional associations and third-party funding bodies. In addition, counseling services for victims of right-wing attacks and legal advice can be approached. However, specialized counseling and support services for researchers in the academic field need to be developed and made widely accessible because of academia's specific institutional and employment-related conditions. Anyone doing research in such sensitive fields should take out legal protection insurance. In addition, solidarity with other groups of actors should be sought, e.g., by networking with media, foundations, NGOs or politicians.
- Scholars should carefully consider when, how and where publicity is to be generated (e.g., via statements on the university's website, articles in newspapers, etc.) – including possible dynamics and unintended effects. Näser-Lather made the attacks public by addressing them in lectures.
- At Alice Salomon University for Applied Studies, a pilot project has been set up to develop a model for such protection concepts.¹⁶

In all possible reactions to attacks, it is important to remember that individual scholars are differently vulnerable, depending on the precariousness of their status in the academic qualification process, their academic position (e.g., tenured or not), their socio-economic situation, etc.

5. Proactive and intelligible science communication

Since constructivist (intersectional) understandings of gender may, to some, appear to be removed from and irrelevant for everyday experiences, they can be perceived as creating unreasonable demands (Schindler 2005: 101). As a result, many people are not concerned about attacks against »gender«. Thus, WGFS scholars should get involved more strongly in public and media debates about intersectional gender relations and hierarchies as well as conversation about the best ways to strive for equality. To achieve this goal, we must make our theories, concepts and findings intelligible in order to make their relevance clear to people without an academic background. It has become obvious that in order to counter antifeminism, it is not enough to claim academic freedom or autonomy. The question of whether we should leave the field to right-wing antifeminists, male supremacists, »gender-critical« feminists etc., has been discussed on WGFS conferences and workshops.¹⁷ One of the results of these discussions is the implementation of the campaign #4GenderStudies on December 18 as a proactive strategy to foster the perception that gender research is useful. It is a day on which scholars in German-speaking countries make the public aware of gender research by using a range of channels including social media, websites and lecture halls.¹⁸

6. Professionalism in communicating with journalists and on social media

Media in general could use their position as independent actors to provide more information about the relevance of WGFS as well as gender-inclusive language than they currently do. Yet, we must keep in mind that journalistic media as well as social media follow different rationales from academia. Both sides seem to have too little an understanding of the specific conditions and constraints in the respectively other field. For instance, scholars aim to increase complexity through research and theorizing, while the media seek to decrease complexity to provide explanations for their audiences that are easier to understand. Thus, one side is criticized for complicated language and the other for unacceptable simplification. Additionally, time and space in the media are limited, driving a constant competition between journalists for placing their topics, texts, features or reports. At the same time, in academia, referencing is much more regulated than in the media, where for the most part, a single reliable source is sufficient. As a result, each side might accuse the other of ignorance, neglecting that they only follow their respective inherent rules and logics (cf. Lünenborg 2008).

7. Transdisciplinary cooperation with WGFS and feminist practitioners and activists

One problem that arises time and again is the lack of continuity in cooperations between scholars, journalists and activists, as scholars are often forced to withdraw from the field after completing their projects. Networks therefore dissolve quickly. This is related, among other things, to framework conditions of higher education, such as the Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz (WzVG, Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act) in Germany, which regulates for how long academics can be employed on fixed-term contracts: academics have to leave academia after 12 years without a permanent contract. This creates precarity for scholars and endangers intra-academic continuity of work and cooperation. At the same time, however, university administrations and third-party funding institutions are increasingly demanding public engagement from academics – sometimes referred to as academia's »third mission«. While desirable, the idea of the academic third mission comes with its own issues. As Sabine Grenz and Juliane Lang noted, knowledge transfer projects often require a lot of

work and time but tend to not be sufficiently taken into account in applications for funding or in the assessment of academic careers (Näser-Lather et al. 2021).

To summarize our considerations, and as Lenz (Näser-Lather et al. 2021) as well as Thym, Mayhofer and Luterbach (2021) suggest, we should continue our lively and controversial debates. WGFS should not fall into the trap of adopting a defensive mode of argumentation. We should not stop addressing different positions among gender scholars, and we should not smooth over critical points and controversies within WGFS. Academic controversies are the norm, not the exception, and flattening them out could be criticized as unscholarly. Instead, WGFS scholars could point out and elaborate on current internal debates and central differences. This would also make it clear that there is no such a thing as a single homogeneous feminism, but different strands of feminisms.

Notes

- 1 We borrow the acronym from Maria do Mar Pereira (2017).
- 2 By »women«, we mean all people who self-identify as women, regardless of the gender assigned to them at birth.
- 3 For the interconnectedness between these different movements cf. Tudor 2021.
- 4 We write »gender« in inverted commas to clarify that we do not refer to the meaning of this term in WGFS, but to its distorting and derogatory use by antifeminist actors. In their terminology, »gender« is employed as an empty signifier that encompasses heterogeneous phenomena such as Gender Studies, gender mainstreaming and measures for the liberalisation of gender relations. Because of this blurriness, Gender Studies can serve as a canvas onto which diverse negative attributions can be projected (see Näser-Lather 2019, 107).
- 5 The DFG or Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the most important German national funding organization, has published rules and standards for gender equality and diversity in their funding programs: https://www.dfg.de/foerderung/grundlagen_rahmenbedingungen/chancengleichheit/index.html, accessed 29 September 2023.
- 6 The German Science and Humanities Council evaluated the structures of Gender Studies in Germany and published their results on 10 July 2023: <https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2023/1385-23.html>, accessed 13 July 2023.
- 7 Funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and the Arts in the State of Hesse from August 2017 to January 2019.
- 8 According to the findings of the »genderism« study, the male supremacist activist and writer Ralf Bönt was a frequent author in the conservative daily newspaper *Die Welt*. Jan Fleischhauer, a columnist in the conservative weekly news magazine *Focus*, and until 2019 in *Spiegel Online* (SPON), was frequently cited on male supremacist websites such as *Genderama*, *man tau* or *Sons of Perseus*. SPON runs one of the most-visited internet forums in Germany, in which male supremacists can reach far more readers than in their own media.
- 9 Way, Ingo, *Der Wokeness-Wahn*, Teil 3. Gerechte Sprache, schwere Sprache. Cicero Plus. <https://www.cicero.de/kultur/-der-wokeness-wahn-teil-3-gerechte-sprache-gender-gendern-n-wort>, accessed on 30.9.2022.
- 10 Basad, Judith Sevinç/Hans-Jörg Vehlewald (2021): *Woke*-Wahnsinn in Deutschland. Wie *wache Aktivist*innen Bestimmen wollen, was wir noch sagen und tun dürfen*. In: *Bild.de*. <https://www.bild.de/politik/2021/politik/woke-wahnsinn-wie-aktivisten-bestimmen-was-wir-noch-sagen-duerfen-76753802.bild.html>, accessed on 13.2.2023. Roedig, Andrea (2012): *Über Begriffsdrachen*, *Der Freitag*, 9 November 2012., Roedig, Andrea (2012): *Wenn die Begriffsdrachen schnauben*, *Die Wochenzeitung*, 13 December 2012.
- 11 Kaspar, Thomas (2020): *Wie gendern?* In: *Frankfurter Rundschau Online*. <https://www.fr.de/politik/wie-gendern-sprache-editorial-frankfurter-rundschau-90037079.html>, accessed on 30.12.2022.
- 12 Hausbichler, Beate (2018): *Gender-Studies? Erfundene Probleme der Hysterikerin!* In: *Der Standard*, 14 February 2018, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000074199471/gender-studies-erfundene-probleme-der-hysterikerin>, accessed on 13.2.2023.

- 13 <https://genderandagency.univie.ac.at/en/>
- 14 As a lecturer in Political Education (»Politische Bildungsarbeit«), Dorothee Beck often meets equal opportunities commissioners in workshops and trainings. On these occasions, she learns about their working conditions.
- 15 A recent example for such a strategy is the one-day workshop »We are the feminisms in the lecture theatres (and in the streets)«, organized by SOAS scholars with colleagues from UCL and LSE. It took place on 4 February 2023 at the University of London to counter a conference entitled »Bringing feminism back to the lecture theatres« at UCL which was organized by »gender-critical« feminists. This workshop made it clear that feminisms are alive in academia and that they need to be intersectional and inclusive.
- 16 Alice Salomon Hochschule (2022): Start eines Pilotprojekts zur Schutzkonzeptentwicklung. Zum Umgang mit (sexualisierter) Diskriminierung, Belästigung, Gewalt und Antifeminismus. <https://www.ash-berlin.eu/hochschule/presse-und-newsroom/ash-news/start-eines-pilotprojekts-zur-schutzkonzeptentwicklung/>, accessed on 13.2.2023.
- 17 E.g., the conference »Feminismus und Öffentlichkeit: Kritik, Widerstand und Interventionen im medialen Wandel« (Frankfurt am Main/Germany, 4–6 October 2017).
- 18 This day was first established in 2018. International participants are welcome.

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