

BOOK REVIEW **OPEN ACCESS**

National Minorities in Serbian Academia: The Role of Gender and Language Barriers

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National Minorities in Serbian Academia: The Role of Gender and Language Barriers

By Karolina Lendák-Kabók

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Drawing on law, gender studies, and social sciences, Karolina Lendák-Kabók has developed a well-informed interdisciplinary study on Hungarian, Slovak, and Romanian women from national minorities and their challenges in Serbian academia. By employing intersectionality as an analytical framework, she explores the relationship between gender, native minority language, and career perspectives in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (Serbia), which is particularly characterized by national diversity. While the Yugoslav quota system sought to integrate ethnic minority members (including national minority women) into the (higher) education system, providing better career opportunities, the current Republic of Serbia often ignores them, as Lendák-Kabók's study shows. Thus, this monograph aims to raise awareness about invisible citizens who do not share equal opportunities with their Serb and/or male counterparts.

The book contains seven chapters. The first, "Introduction: Intersectionality as a Lived Experience," masterfully explains intersectionality theory and method. It presents the historical

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context of Vojvodina, looks at women's situation from an intersectional perspective (regarding both ethnicity and gender), and explores the language-related problems ethnic minorities face in the Serbian education system. The study's greatest strength is that it comes from the author's personal experience, bringing the readers a taste of authenticity:

...I felt this urge of becoming a storyteller because by that time I accumulated so many gender-based and nationality-based inequality experiences (some I felt on my own skin, some I just observed), weighing on mind and urging me to tell them to the world (p. 1).

The second chapter, "Education as an Institution and as a Mechanism in the Lives of Eastern European Ethnic Minority Women," focuses on mixed, though intertwined topics such as gender and ethnicity roles in higher education, minority language education following the language barrier (of learning Serbian), higher education and educational migration abroad, as well as women's perspectives careers and leadership in academia. Here, Lendák-Kabók provides more context before getting more into the results and details of her research, which unfolds in chapters three to six.

In the third chapter, "Limited Options – Ethnic Minority Education in Serbia," the author explores learning prospects for minority students (Hungarian, Slovak, and Romanian) in their native language. In particular, she points out their underrepresentation at the University of Novi Sad. By analysing educational policies, strategies and support programmes for post-secondary education concerning the three ethnic minorities, Lendák-Kabók demonstrates her profound expertise in law. She also reviews non-governmental organizations in Vojvodina that aim to foster connections between underrepresented students and professors within Serbian academia.

The fourth chapter's title, "Lost in Translation? How Does the Language Barrier Effect Ethnic Minority High School Graduates when Choosing their University Education?" aptly encapsulates its content. The author inspects the quantitative data she collected in 26 Hungarian, Slovak, and Romanian national minority high schools in Vojvodina by questioning 2,192 graduating seniors and strikingly covering 66.2% of such students to determine their status and potential career paths. Lendák-Kabók concluded that almost 40% of such students think of leaving Serbia for their kinstates (Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania), which allow them to study in their native languages and enjoy the privileges the European Union (EU) provides. Accordingly, such migration causes a severe brain drain. In addition, the study revealed gender-based differences: one-third of girls dreamed of studying in the EU, and generally, girls appear more eager to seek higher education and determined about their careers than boys because of the Serbian language barrier. However, in contrast to previous research, Lendák-Kabók concludes that high school graduates migrate more for the prospects offered by the EU rather than because of linguistic obstacles (p. 172).

The fifth chapter, "The Language Barrier as the Ethnic 'Glass Ceiling': Ethnic Micro-Universes within Serbian Universities", discloses a quantitative examination of how language proficiency influences the professional trajectories of women belonging to national minorities.

Lendák-Kabók encounters feelings of alienation through language within the Serbian higher education system and investigates such narratives through an intersectional lens. Her research demonstrates that language poses a constant struggle, particularly for female ethnic minority students, while their male colleagues take advantage of mastering another language. However, the level of hardship also depends on the study field: social sciences and humanities professors often require students to have higher language skills than in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

The sixth chapter, “What Does it Take to Build a Career in a Serbian Academia as an Ethnic Minority Woman?”, uncovers the status of ethnic minority women concerning their career progression and attainment of leadership roles in Serbian academia. The interviews with female and male lecturers from minority and majority backgrounds provided complete results. According to the research, ethnic minority women use specific discourses to explain their situation and challenges in Serbian academic institutions. Hidden biases at the personal level (including gender, the feeling of otherness, and language obstacles) make their career path even more demanding. Lendák-Kabók points out the role of horizontal segregation (i.e., unequal distribution of individuals across various disciplines based on gender), causing the marginalization of ethnic minority women scholars in social sciences and the humanities. Finally, despite their qualifications and efforts, these women face invisible barriers to reaching influential leadership positions within the Serbian academic system:

The women interviewees did not talk about how they could change something in the system by working together, rather they were adhering to fate and trying to make sense of their positions through various strategies. This lack of solidarity might be attributed to neoliberalism, which crept into academia, making the individual the most important. None of the women mentioned that having a decision-making position might help other women. (p. 167)

Therefore, Lendák-Kabók puts the situation of Serbian academia in the broader context of widespread free-market economies, which could benefit future research and new case studies.

In the last chapter, the author provides conclusions and her contribution to the field. No other research has employed intersectionality to analyse the relationship between nationality and gender in the Serbian higher education system, as Lendák-Kabók has done in this book. I admire her skills in combining qualitative and quantitative methods to effectively communicate the problems that underrepresented students and academics face. The tables provided helped to visualize and summarise the data. Lendák-Kabók reached all the set goals, presenting her data very responsively and comprehensively. Thus, the text is not solely for those in academia; I hope it reaches local policymakers so the diverse university community becomes more inclusive, accessible, and open for women’s leadership.

Reference

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