

Zhanna Gevorgyan
Gender, Sex, Taboo

The series "Applied Sexual Science" seeks dialogue: it has an interdisciplinary outlook and particularly aims to link theory and practice. Members of the academy and of practical projects such as counseling centers and self-help organizations get into conversation with one another at eye-level. In this way, it might be possible to shorten the often lengthy transfer processes through which practical experiences have been making their belated entrance in scientific institutions. At the same time science may thus contribute to underpin and contextualize new concepts.

The series is based on a positive understanding of sexuality. The focus here is on the question of how a self-determined and appreciative approach to sex/gender and sexuality can be promoted in society. Sexuality is regarded as being embedded in social contexts: in modern bourgeois societies it is an area of life in which gender, class, and racist relations as well as ideological preconditions intersect, and often conflictually so. Simultaneously, in this area negotiations about an open and diversity-accepting development of society take place.

VOLUME 40

APPLIED SEXUAL SCIENCE

Edited by Maika Böhm, Harald Stumpe,

Heinz-Jürgen Voß and Konrad Weller

Institute for Applied Sexuality Studies

at Merseburg University of Applied Sciences

Zhanna Gevorgyan

Gender, Sex, Taboo

Insights from Armenian Sex Education

With a preface by Detlef Pech

Psychosozial-Verlag

Dissertation an der KSBF (Kultur-, Sozial- und Bildungswissenschaftliche
Fakultät), Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Bibliographic information of the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
(German National Library)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available at
<http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Original edition

© 2024 Psychosozial-Verlag GmbH & Co KG

E-Mail: info@psychosozial-verlag.de

www.psychosozial-verlag.de

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Cover: Jana Berger

Cover design based on drafts by Hanspeter Ludwig, Wetzlar

ISBN 978-3-8379-3342-0 (Print)

ISBN 978-3-8379-6221-5 (E-Book-PDF)

ISSN 2367-2420

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Acknowledgement

The book is a work of several years of empirical research with the fruitful exchange of ideas and support of numerous people. As this work was part of my PhD thesis, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisors for allowing space for lively and focused debates with my peers, for their constant support, and for valuable feedback.

Thank you, Prof. Dr. Detlef Pech, for supervising my thesis and for inspiring me with insightful ideas, while encouraging me to stay as close as possible to the Armenian context and reality. Thank you, Prof. Dr. Anna Moldenhauer, for the years of full support, critical feedback, and professional expertise you provided during the most difficult periods of the research development.

I could not have written this work without the invaluable input of my interviewees and the fieldwork with the classroom participants, whose consent to participate and support the development of this study had been indispensable.

I express my thankfulness to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for their generous funding of Armenian studies scholarship and to the Armenian General Benevolent Union for the grants.

I am very thankful to my colleagues for lively discussions, for sharing their knowledge, feedback, and support during the writing.

To my dearest sister Lida, cousins, and to all my friends who have always been there, giving valuable suggestions and strength to accomplish this endeavour. To my dear family, for their unconditional support and love.

Preface

The discussion of sexuality and gender in German schools has been a controversial topic since the introduction of “sexual education” in 1968 (with the exception of East Germany, which must be considered differently). When it comes to curricular reforms, it is often this field that leads to controversies. This was notably the case in Baden-Württemberg in 2015, where parts of a planned restructuring in schools had to be rolled back due to public outcry.

In her work, Zhanna Gevorgyan turns her attention to a country where there has been no “history of disputes” in this regard because addressing sexuality and gender in the curricula was not previously envisaged. In other words, she takes the opportunity to conduct classroom observations and interviews in Armenia during the initial phase of introducing this new field in schools. The “Healthy Lifestyle,” as an overarching subject for health education that also addresses gender and sexuality, has been implemented in Armenian schools since 2008 but has been scarcely researched to date. This presents a unique opportunity to gain insights into this process, which can only be successful if navigated with expertise in the field.

Zhanna Gevorgyan presents a study that is likely to be the first to closely observe the implementation of discussions of sexuality and gender in such a school system. She points out that globally, schools are considered a central place for sex education, and teachers’ beliefs and attitudes play a key role in successful implementation.

Despite this, educational research knows surprisingly little about specific classroom situations. Complex ethnographically oriented or influenced research can only capture individual cases, making it difficult to answer questions about what is “usual” in classroom instruction. Zhanna Gevorgyan’s work, however, makes an invaluable contribution in this regard, specifically focusing on this aspect. This is due to the unique opportunity to accompany the implementation of a newly developed curriculum

that provides precise, time-based guidelines for the content to be addressed. It also offers a chance to assess and analyze how teachers handle these content guidelines, highlighting the conflict between instructional objectives and teacher positioning (which, in turn, corresponds to societal positions).

Furthermore, the study introduces an aspect that has not been examined in this way before – the content dimension. It explores negotiations about gender in specific classroom situations, which form the basis of the analysis. Zhanna Gevorgyan demonstrates how a lack of qualification in this field ultimately leads to the perpetuation and reproduction of stereotypes. The research reveals that the quality of curricula is significantly overshadowed by the absence of expertise among teachers regarding gender-related issues.

*Detlef Pech,
September 2023*

Abbreviations

AOE	Abstinence-Only Education
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
BZgA	The Federal Centre for Health Education (Bundezentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung)
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CGLS	Center for Gender and Leadership Studies
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
EU	European Union
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HL	Healthy Lifestyle
HSE	Holistic Sexuality Education
IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Federation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PT	Paramount topics
RA	Republic of Armenia
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
ST	Subordinated topics
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infections
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
WRC	Women Resource Center
YSU	Yerevan State University

1 Introduction: Sexuality Education and Gender in Armenian Schools

This chapter provides insight into the main characteristics of the work. A brief introduction to the main topic of sexuality education and “Healthy Lifestyle” (HL) program, conceptual delineation, the purpose and significance of the study, methodological approach, and key research questions, are addressed in this chapter. It also addresses the main theoretical traditions which are reviewed in detail in the next chapter. A brief overview of gender in the HL program and gender-related issues with regard to the Armenian context provides a concise introduction to the topic, thereby showing both the academic development as well as where the academic gap exists.

1.1 Sexuality Education

Sexuality education aims to improve adolescents’ sexual and reproductive health and rights such as reducing unintended pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) among this age group. Depending on the area, the type and statutory character of sexuality education can differ. Generally, three types of sexuality education programmes are discussed in the literature – Abstinence programmes, Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) or a combination of both Abstinence and CSE, as well as Holistic Sexuality Education (HSE) (Winkelmann, 2010). Within traditional light, the Abstinence programmes often have an abstinence character by highlighting the negative impact of sexual intercourse and providing no or little information about healthy sexual relationships. In contrast, HSE portrays relationships in a positive light, highlights safety measures, and claims to provide evidence-based information on different areas of relationships (ibid.).

Schools are often identified as the primary setting for imparting sexual health information (Harrison and Dempsey, 1998; Seiler-Ramadas et al., 2020). There are myriad factors that facilitate the successful implementation of sexuality education. Literature in this field frequently highlights the importance of well-prepared teachers in schools for effective delivery (Allen, 2020; Barr et al., 2014). Whereas widespread gender stereotypes are mentioned as key reasons to impede the successful implementation of these programmes (Iyer and Aggleton, 2013).

Numerous health organizations are engaged in providing evidence-based information on the effective development and delivery of sexuality education. Their reports often serve as a framework for policymakers and educational specialists, supporting the global introduction of HSE. Key contributors in this field include various United Nations (UN) agencies, including the World Health Organization (WHO), along with independent organizations such as the Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA)¹ and the European Network of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF EN). The latter, active in over 140 countries, advocates for sexual and reproductive health and rights. In the strategic framework 2016–2022, IPPF mentions the aim to promote gender equality and youth access to CSE (IPPF Strategic Framework 2016–2022).² The BZgA is a unit responsible for the implementation of sexuality education in Germany and is engaged in publishing several reports on different aspects of sexuality education within a global context. Together with the WHO Regional Office for Europe, the BZgA has produced several publications such as a framework for core competencies of sexuality educators (Kapella and Brockschmidt, 2017). This report identifies several components crucial for professional instruction of sexuality education, including attitudes, skills, and knowledge. Key attributes include open-mindedness, respect for others, comprehensive knowledge of sexuality education topics and methods, and the ability to use interactive teaching approaches. The authors discern implicit and explicit attitudes that guide educators' behaviour, linking personal attitudes to societal values (ibid., p. 25). Emphasizing the importance of awareness and reflection on personal beliefs and values, the report suggests that

1 The Federal Centre for Health Education in German is Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA).

2 IPPF's Strategic Framework: 2016–2022. Retrieved October 19, 2019, from <https://www.ippf.org/resource/ippfs-strategic-framework-2016--2022>.

educators remain open to questioning perspectives as a vital component of effective sexuality education delivery. Some of the relevant skills include intolerance towards gender-based violence and discrimination, avoidance of imposing personal beliefs, fostering critical thinking in students and helping them discern reliable sources of information from unscientific beliefs (Milton et al., 2001). While pedagogical and content knowledge and delivery of factual information are key aspects mentioned for a sexuality educator, it is also believed that the delivery of sexuality education should align with community values (Barr et al., 2014). Ignoring local context and adopting foreign models without adaptation can hinder program success. Consistently, field authors note that teachers’ attitudes towards sexuality education topics are crucial for successful implementation (Preston, 2016), whereas insufficient training and negative attitudes towards the subject can result in reluctance to teach (Cohen et al., 2011).

1.2 “Healthy Lifestyle” Program in Armenian Schools

Sexuality education is known by different names, including healthy lifestyle education, family life education, and relationship education. Healthy Lifestyle education is taught in various countries, including Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Latvia. Several legislative regulations define Armenian adolescents’ rights to adequate knowledge about their health. Article 5 of the 2002 law on Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights³ (described in more detail in the fourth chapter “Sexuality Education and Healthy Lifestyle Program”) describes the adolescents’ right to proper knowledge about reproductive health and rights. In a strategic plan to promote a healthy lifestyle in Armenia, a government document highlights the significant role of people’s lifestyles and behaviour in influencing the prevalence of preventable diseases. The same regulation notes that according to international health organizations healthy lifestyle is the cheapest and most effective method to prevent them.⁴ The document emphasizes the

3 See the Republic of Armenia Law on Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights, available in Armenian. Retrieved July 28, 2019, from <http://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=108716>.

4 The appendix N1 of the Government of the Republic of Armenia 2014 protocol decision N50 of the November 27. Retrieved August 19, 2019, from <http://www.irtek.am/views/act.aspx?aid=82287>.

need for ongoing cooperative work between different institutions, primarily in education, to achieve this goal. One of the approaches is promoting a healthy lifestyle in schools among adolescents (ibid.).

Several programmes have been piloted in Armenian schools but the HL program has received a nationwide mandatory status since 2008. As of 2022, the program is taught to pupils from 8th to 11th-grade. There is no separate sexuality education subject in Armenian schools. This school-based HL education is considered to be the most closely related program to sexuality education as it covers topics around reproductive health and gender-related issues such as family formation, gender inequality, unintended pregnancy and gender-based violence.

The studies examining gender topics in Armenia reveal that it is a predominantly patriarchal country, characterized by rigid gender roles and characteristics (Durand and Osipov, 2015; Khachatryan et al., 2015; Osipov and Sargizova, 2016; Ziemer, 2020a). In the patriarchal society where women and men are prescribed certain gender roles, the reproduction of femininity and masculinity is a continuous process (Osipov and Sargizova, 2016). Patriarchy – often defined as men's dominance over others – is still influential around the world and there is hardly any egalitarian society.

Gender, as a part of the social order and division, permeates all societal institutions and influences the construction of knowledge. It is essential for pedagogues to receive adequate training to become gender aware of gender issues and to apply this knowledge in their teaching. Globally, teachers report receiving inadequate training for teaching sexuality education (Eisenberg et al., 2010) and Armenia is no exception. The teaching of the HL program was assigned to physical educators, a decision more influenced by available scheduling in physical education than by the educators' matching skills. Of a handful of research that examined the HL program, it is shown that these physical educators were poorly prepared to teach the course as they had inadequate teacher training and often resisted discussions on gender and reproductive rights.⁵ Furthermore, integrating this program into sports subject raises concerns, given the known reproduction of power dynamics and hyper-masculine characteristics during physical

5 Is there Sexual Education in Armenia? 2015. Society Without Violence NGO. Retrieved April, 5, 2019, from http://www.svv.am/index.php/en/what-we-do/most-recent/2-uncategorised/887-is-there-sexual-education-in-armenia#_ftn1.%22.

education classes, a topic explored further in the following and discussion chapters.

In one of the few studies on the HL program conducted by Yerevan State University (YSU) Center for Gender and Leadership Studies (CGLS) and Women Resource Center (WRC), twenty-one physical educators were interviewed. These educators taught the HL program to 10th to 11th graders in different regions of Armenia, including the capital, Yerevan (CGLS, 2018). These in-depth interviews revealed the HL teachers’ attitudes towards the program and their awareness of the themes in the curriculum.

The latter study showed that the teachers approached the topics through their personal attitudes which became particularly expressive when discussing gender issues. The authors argued that the teachers interpreted these roles through their personal value system (ibid., p. 27). For instance, they tended to value the viewpoints of pupils who, in their opinion, thought “traditionally” more highly than those expressing other views, which some interviewed teachers labeled as “European” (ibid.). Another example showed that the teacher from Gyumri – the second-largest city in Armenia – would state that a father should be the head of the family while a mother should assume the role of a housewife and care for children. The study also found that, according to these teachers, most male pupils in classroom were against gender equality. These boys believed that women should be subordinate to men and not work outside the home, a role they saw as reserved for men. They argued that in families with equality, a woman’s ability to voice her opinion and disagree with a man could lead to conflicts and violence against women. One of these gender-related discussions recounted by a teacher from Yerevan highlights the general attitude towards gender:

“There is a girl, that you think, is a real housewife, there is a boy who says . . . Last year our Albert graduated, he was saying: “Pass . . . there is no girl to take home” ((meaning getting married)) while I was saying him “You “Qyartu”⁶ shut up . . . That your mom wears short” we have a topic there: will you help your wife? I am asking him whether he will help, he was saying “did I take a woman home so that I get up and wash the dishes” and he was saying when we were talking all the time “No, I am not going to get married, there are no girls, all are this” you should have been there at that time to see

6 Definition of a neo-qyartu: A modern day “good guy.” Retrieved October, 3, 2019, from <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Neo-Qyartu>.

what the class was doing (reacting) both boys and girls. Other boys asked him “when your mom is lying sick won’t you do anything or won’t you go to the shop” while he is saying “moms are sacred.” I am saying you idiot⁷ that mother is a wife of another one, right? if she is sacred for you then your wife should also be sacred for you” (ibid., p. 28).

The report also indicated that teachers felt discomfort discussing sexual-related topics and placed importance on the pupil’s background knowledge, which is initially gained in their families (CGLS, 2018). One implication of the study was a recommendation to equip HL teachers with textbooks and materials that provide versatile knowledge.

Apart from a few reports, literature on the examination of the implementation of the HL program, particularly the issues and challenges related to teaching, didactics, curricular topics has largely been neglected by academic analysis. While there are some media articles and reports from local organizations, a detailed exploration of these topics and potential areas for improvement is lacking, leaving a number of crucial questions unanswered. Although there are reports based on interviews with HL educators and parents, there have been no classroom observations of HL program lessons. Hence, the information on how gender-related topics are discussed/thematized during HL lessons is missing. This book aims to address the academic gap by exploring what knowledge is produced when gender-related topics are discussed during HL lessons and how this gender-related knowledge is generated.

1.3 Conceptual Framework

Gender – often seen as a basis for social inequalities – is distinct from biological sex and encompasses the social construction of femininity and masculinity. This distinction explains gender differences, which are often rooted in societal norms and expectations (Goffman, 1976). This view is also claimed to be shared among psychologists who see individual’s traits as inherently linked to one’s sex (Stacey and Thorne, 1985). Many

7 The literal translation of Դամբուլ (dambul) is plum but the figurative meaning is “an inept person,” Glosbe dictionary. Retrieved October, 3, 2019, from <https://hy.glosbe.com/hy/en/%D5%A4%D5%A1%D5%B4%D5%A2%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%AC>.

scholars emphasize that gender is constructed through various mechanisms, including societal institutions that normalize and essentialize gender roles. For example, gender marketing and capitalism have led to the segregation of products such as pink and blue clothing and gender-typed toys in spite of scientific evidence that children can go through more or less the same neurological development if provided with necessary toys (Eliot, 2009; Brown, 2014). Dimorphic segregation of toys for girls and boys is mainstream worldwide. For instance, chocolates for men and women may have identical ingredients but are often marketed separately, with different packaging and pricing, a practice that is rarely questioned by consumers.

There is no universal definition for gender norms. Depending on societal perceptions and context, people produce and reproduce them through different tools including language and actions. The perception of gender as a natural biological attribute makes it difficult to recognize its constructed nature and the differences between men and women it engenders. The concept's meaning can vary depending on a study's narrative. This work's conceptualization of gender-related terminology relies on the sociological categorization of 'sex,' 'sex category,' and 'gender' as applied by West and Zimmerman in "*Doing Gender*" (1987). Doing gender is one explanation how people construct and do gender. It is rooted in ethnomethodology and social constructionist traditions and is central for understanding gender construction. The exploration of these concepts, the theoretical stance, and field discussion is explained in detail in the next chapter. There is critique regarding the observation of people's interactions through fixed concepts such as gender (Smith, 2009). Nonetheless, the concepts such as gender roles, gender equality and gender-based violence have been part of the curricular lessons. Consequently, these and other gender-related lessons have received particular attention aiming to interpret these dialogues while highlighting the fluid nature of gender and displaying both the explicit theoretical knowledge and tacit understanding of the actors.

Gender is not just a social institution; it is, along with categories such as race, ethnicity, and class a central aspect of daily social interactions and power relations (Lorber, 1994). For instance, not only masculinities and femininities vary from place to place and are not fixed attributes but also they are being constructed and re-constructed through interactions (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Connell, 1991). Social interests are often per-

ceived as objective reality rather than products of people's interactions (Martin, 2004). Risman (2004) distinguishes four theoretical traditions to explain gender. By giving credentials to West and Zimmerman's "*doing gender*" theory, Risman highlights the reproduction of inequality through social interaction.

Most people experience the world through discourses. Language plays an instrumental role in gendered discussions, whether directly addressing gender-related topics or being expressed implicitly during discussions of other topics.⁸ Schooling is an inevitable part of society in a result of which knowledge is produced and reproduced via interaction. Discourses facilitate this process and shape most people's everyday practices. Access to these discourses and understanding how people talk about a particular phenomenon through interaction are crucial. Within a social constructionist context, Burr defines knowledge as a "*construction or version of a phenomenon that has received the stamp of truth in our society*" (2015, p. 80). Discourses around femininity and masculinity can produce and reproduce knowledge accepted as truth in a given society. For example, the perception of women as inherent caretakers in Armenian society might be viewed through positive lens, meanwhile be perceived differently in some Western societies raising questions about the reinforcement of entrenched beliefs about femininity.

According to Lorber, "*Individuals are born sexed but not gendered, and they have to be taught to be masculine or feminine*" (1994, p. 22) and schools along with other institutions such as families, partake in driving adolescents into gendered roles. The generalization of traits, that is giving rigid gender characteristics to women and men, limits diversity within the same sex and hinders the recognition of potential commonalities between sexes.⁹

8 Discourse often refers to a language in use, while discourse analysis pertains to examination of this language, encompassing both written texts and spoken interactions. Discourse analysis is mentioned here for the analysis of conversations and should not be confused with the Foucaudian analytical method known as discourse and conversation analysis.

9 The quotations in this book are used in part to emphasize and explore the beauty of the thought delivered by the author. At other times, quotes were deliberately not explained further by the researcher to deliver the exact wording the author decided to use in the context.