

La traduction dans une perspective de genre

Enjeux politiques, éditoriaux
et professionnels

Édité par

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“Thematic Adaptation”

On Localizing the Language of “Global Feminism” and Gender Politics in Transnational Feminist Translation Practice and Studies

Luise von Flotow

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the linguistic and socio-cultural challenges encountered in the many different attempts by “global feminism” to mobilize concepts deriving from gender politics worldwide: the term “gender” itself and derivations such as “gender mainstreaming” are discussed. Then the article moves to questions around the translation and adaptation of “international gender talk” and cites various discussions from the realm of transnational feminist Translation Studies, a relatively new approach to the problem of communicating “gender” issues across diverse cultural and linguistic borders. It ends with a description and assessment of a recent “localizing” translation project, namely *Corps Accord. Pour une sexualité positive* (Montreal, Les Éditions du Remue-Ménage, 2019), an intersectional, post-colonial and transnational feminist translation into French of selected chapters from *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the famed American feminist reproductive health manual from the 1970s. “Thematic adaptation” is proposed and discussed as an appropriate translation strategy for such gender-focused materials.

Keywords: global vs transnational feminism; gender politics; Translation Studies; translation practice; thematic adaptation.

Mots-clés: féminisme global vs transnational; politiques de genre; traductologie; pratique de la traduction; adaptation thématique.

1. WHERE IT STARTED: “GLOBAL” VS “TRANSNATIONAL”
FEMINISM/GENDER POLITICS

[... T]here is a big difference between global feminism and transnational feminism. It boils down to whether we are committed to wide-reaching, yet locally sensitive organizing, or if we prefer to promote a one-size-fits-all, please-all-the-world diluted pseudo-feminist politic. (Hill 2011)

These are fighting words, the sort that seem to mark a division between “global/international feminism” and what has come to be called “transnational feminism”. The former – global/international feminism – has in many scholars’ estimation come to evoke white, imperialist, ‘western’ Anglo-American United Nations and World Bank ideology that is applied worldwide, while the latter – transnational feminism – represents a more local focus that takes account of differences between cultures and the women in those cultures, promoting respect and understanding of those differences. The first seeks to apply its ideas/policies worldwide, the second requires and admits adaptation. This problematic division has been examined and studied by numerous international and gender studies scholars, for instance around the term “gender mainstreaming”. The consensus seems to be that this universalizing concept, developed in the 1990s and implemented at the 1995 Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, may sound good but has basically failed in its global/international applications. Jane Parpart writes:

Gender mainstreaming (GM), with its promise of gender equality, empowerment and transformation, has become a central pillar of development discourse, policy and practice, particularly in international development organisations such as the UNDP, the World Bank and state-led development agencies. Yet, the implementation of GM in these institutions has largely been disappointing. (2014, 382)

Parpart and many other writers on questions around “gender mainstreaming” in international development ascribe the disappointment, indeed the failure, of this and other “gender” policies of governments, NGOs, and international institutions such as the World Bank, USAID or the EU to a number of factors, mostly deriving from a sizeable gap between policy and implementation, between rhetoric and practice.

But the vagueness of the term “gender” itself is also a problem. And this is not easy to address. For example, one definition of “gender mainstreaming” in English, reads as follows:

An organisational strategy to bring a *gender* perspective to all aspects of an institution’s policy and activities, through building *gender* capacity and accountability. (Reeves and Baden 2000; my emphasis)

A definition that uses the term it is defining in order to define it (as highlighted above) – and that doesn’t explain what the basic concept “gender” means is only relatively useful. Indeed, as Kornelia Slavova (2014, 31-35) shows, since the 1970s at least four different theoretical approaches to and understandings of the term gender have developed in the English-speaking world alone. And Joan Scott insists:

[...] there is no single original concept of gender to which subsequent translations can refer. Instead, there has been an ongoing conversation across linguistic and cultural boundaries in which the term is addressed, disputed, qualified, and adapted; in the process the ambiguities that the term itself has acquired, the tensions it contains, are revealed. (Flotow and Scott 2016, 356-357)

The over-arching issue lies in the international application of the Anglo-American term “gender” (and more recently of other “sensitive language”: Biermann 2022), in the assumption that its multiple and disputed meanings can apply anywhere else and that it can be translated easily into other cultures anywhere in the world. Jane Parpart, however, observes and concludes that “Gendered practices and power relations *are embedded in social, political and economic contexts and have to be addressed in those settings*” (2014, 392; my emphasis) and not in international policies formulated as though they could apply worldwide.

2. LOCALIZED GENDER IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

The “local” aspect of the vague but universalized term “gender” has been a topic in the field of international development studies since the late 1990s. The problems arising from the (failed) blanket application of the term have caused numerous specialists to point to and analyze its down-sides, and promote locally-focused work (Dedeoglu 2012; Sharify-Funk 2016) in which they apply adapted versions of the precepts of transnational feminism. Already in 2002, Nancy Naples and Manisha Desai produced the collection *Women’s Activism and Globalization Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics* which addresses issues around “gender” and development initiatives from Nicaragua to Morocco to Japan. The contributions to this volume systematically explore “local”

activisms, and reject the international “gender talk” that prevailed at the time in international development efforts.

To take two examples of such studies: in “Localising the Global – Resolution 1325 as a Tool for Promoting Women’s Rights and Gender Equality in Rwanda” (2018), Diana Højlund Madsen explores the links between the gender language laid out in (UN) Res 1325 (a resolution on the UN’s “women peace and security agenda”) and the actual practices resulting from it. She notes a number of issues: first, that “[D]espite some progress, stereotypical notions about women and femininity seem to prevail related to this ‘women, peace and security’ agenda... [indicating] an understanding of gender and women as naturally ‘different’ [the (more) peaceful gender] from men who are associated with being more aggressive” (*ibid.*, 75). Second, she suggests that the “international gender talk” may be just that: *talk*. And she shows that “tension exists between local gender understandings and practises and the global gender norms” as gender is understood differently in the women’s groups that her research is based upon. Third, she writes that the international “gender talk” has influenced the traditional division of labour at the local level and in some cases the reference to gender and the appropriation of gender norms have undermined the roles and responsibilities of men and as a consequence led to more obligations and a bigger workload for women (*ibidem*). To summarize: the international gender talk in this Rwandan case mobilizes stereotypical notions about women being inherently different from men (more peaceful), uses terminology and concepts that are quite foreign to the local culture where it is supposed to be applied, and in restricting its “gender” focus to women makes women’s lives more difficult.

Interestingly Madsen assesses the situation in terms of translation: “global gender norms” and “international gender talk” require *translation* into local vernacular, local concepts, and local traditions and behaviours – but she does address actual interlingual translation.

The second critique of universalized applications of “global feminist” gender ideology comes from Turkey and examines how the concept can be ‘bent’/adapted into other shapes. In “Contesting Global Gender Equality Norms: The Case of Turkey” (2019), Marella Bodur Ün studies how the universal or international gender norms that Turkey subscribed to in the 1990s as it prepared to join the EU have gradually received a new “translation” over the twenty years of the current government in power. The local has acquired a distinctly conservative, reactionary tinge as a more pious Islamic politics has taken hold and established itself. Ün shows how local actors often strategically and selectively appropri-

ate or ‘bend’ international feminist “gender talk” to achieve their own political goals. She examines the discourse of KADEM, a conservative, pro-government women’s organization founded by the daughter of the current president (*ibid.*, 841) and shows how it “has contested the moral validity of gender equality norms” (*ibid.*, 846). Its members understand “gender” as “grounded in Western culture” as it attempts to equalize women and men, whereas “justice” (which KADEM promotes) points to a “superior concept in which equality is inherent and refers to equity, balance, a higher understanding of fair treatment, and liabilities between men and women” (*ibid.*, 844). Ün concludes that “The concept of women’s rights developed in a specific region *reflects the socio-cultural, political, and religious dynamics of that region*” (my emphasis). Specifically in this case, KADEM has “translated” “the concept of [gender] equality not only as an alien construct, a Western import that does not fit into non-Western normative contexts”, but also as an inferior one, as it “fails to acknowledge women’s fitrat (inherent qualities)” (*ibidem*).

This example from Turkey differs from the Rwandan case in that it shows how internationalized “gender talk” can be turned into alien ‘western’ concepts that are deemed or presented as hostile to the local. In the case studied by Ün, the discourse of the ‘west’ has been adapted for inverse political use locally, undermining the intent of the universalizing Anglo-American concept.

Questions around such adaptations and applications of “international gender talk” have been raised for the past twenty years in international development studies and assessments of international aid programs. The consensus seems to be that international applications are not a success. This outcome is often couched in terms of translation: scholars study the “*translations* of gender norms” and the “vernacularizations” that are undertaken by “norm *translators*” (Madsen 2018; Ün 2019) but they never address the actual interlingual translations or interpretations that must occur. This is the domain of transnational Translation Studies.

3. TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST/GENDER-POLITICAL WORK IN TRANSLATION STUDIES SO FAR

In the preparations for the Routledge *Handbook on Translation, Feminism and Gender* (2020), the editors, Luise von Flotow and Hala Kamal, received an abstract for an article that would address exactly this international aid/NGO translation problem. Set in Kuwait, the abstract focused

on activists' opposition to legislation that would condone so-called "honour-killing". Funded by international English-speaking NGOs, the Kuwaiti activist translators were described as being caught in a difficult situation that had two specific prongs: first, the term "honour-killing" is an English one, a drastic one-dimensional version of the local terminology that refers to various behaviours that punish women and that are lumped together under the local term "disciplinary violence". This term and the practices it encompasses have a complicated cultural history in the Middle East and Asia and are highly politicized in immigrant situations in Europe and North America. Second, the translator-activists were experiencing their work as a form of cultural betrayal as they reported to, translated for, and were funded by the foreign NGOs, who required relatively intimate information about local occurrences. Unfortunately, this article did not come to fruition, but it certainly showed how actual everyday interlingual translation problems are brought on by and impact "global feminist" applications of gender policies and ideology.

A related point is raised by Rahul Gairola (2017) who writes on the extent to which the power dynamics of colonialism are still an important force in certain countries, where 'western' discourses around gay bodies are translated into the receiving culture "through colonial and postcolonial mimicry" (Gairola, citing Appadurai, *ibid.*, 73). Problems arise when the language and identity categories for certain gender discourses do not exist: how do you adopt a lesbian identity, Gairola asks, "in a culture in which there is no word for 'lesbian'" (*ibidem*)? And, how do you translate that word if there is no word for it in the target language?

Interesting analytical work has begun to appear in this transnational feminist/gender-political field. In regard to the language of queer/gay identities, the article "Translating Queer: Reading Caste, Decolonizing Praxis" (Upadhyay and Bakshi 2020) points to the translation effects when Anglo-American gender queer terminology moves to Indian homosexual/gay environments, where the upper caste's privileged access to such English terminology and the concepts it carries plays an important role in their identity politics and their caste designation.

The article by Kanchuka Dharmasiri (2017) that traces the links/parallels between the texts of the Buddhist *Therīgāthā*, written 2000 years ago by Buddhist nuns, and those of more recent European feminist thinkers (Wollstonecraft, Beauvoir) shows how re-readings of local cultural materials can be mobilized to explain and make useful the more recent concepts from which the term "gender" has emerged, and which are often rejected by local politics/politicians as 'western'. Similarly, Bouchra Laghzali (2017) describes how the work of CERFI (Centre

d'Études et de Recherches Féminines en Islam) addresses and tempers the impact of centuries of local interpretations of the Qur'an through its work translating and commenting in French and English “in order to reach non-Muslim audiences, largely to mitigate clichéd ideas they may hold about women in Islam” (*ibid.*, 210) as well as in Arabic “to dispel pre-conceptions that the local Arabic-speaking community might have about the role of Muslim women in society” (*ibidem*). In the work of CERFI, feminist translation and commentary on certain passages of the Qur'an or on laws deriving from traditional misogynist interpretations adapt ‘western’ ideas to local situations and practices and develop outreach – both locally and internationally.

The article “‘Slut’ in Translation: The SlutWalk Movement from Canada to Morocco” (Robinson 2017) follows the English term “slut”, recuperated by feminist initiatives in Canada to respond to the woman-denigrating/controlling use of such terminology by police authorities, as it spread to a SlutWalks movement worldwide. Robinson discusses how the Moroccan movement adapted the term “slut” for local use, broadening the focus and the terminology to address harassment, since “street harassment is a more immediate concern because it is a visible form of gender-based violence that is so commonplace in Morocco that people tend to dismiss it as a normal everyday interaction or even flirting” (*ibid.*, 214). Robinson concludes that in such a case, transnational translation/adaptation develops from and creates “thematic links” rather than insisting on lexical or linguistic ones. It addresses local particularities and needs.

Finally, in “Displacing LGBT: Global Englishes, Activism and Translated Sexualities”, Serena Bassi (2017) explores the Italian adaptation of an English-language LGBT YouTube project as a way to interrogate the so-called “globalisation of sexuality” (*ibid.*, 235). Her focus is on the internationalization of various English-language terms around queer/gay/transgender identity and human rights activism and their meaningfulness and applicability – the adaptations they must undergo as a new gender identity politics develops along with the language to express it.

In summary, it seems that while individual terms, such as “gender”, “gender mainstreaming”, “lesbian”, “honour-killing”, “slut” and newer Anglo-American gender-bender vocabulary disseminated worldwide in movies and TV series (via dubbing or subtitling, Ranzato 2020), and via the internet and social media, will continue their “nomadic and volatile” movement (Slavova 2014), this happens as much through “thematic adaptation”, explanation, and discussion as it does via direct translation. Indeed, in a recent German commentary entitled *Woke Is Broke*, translator Pieke Biermann confronts the conundrum of English-American

“sensitive language” that reaches from terms like the 1990s “gender” and “LGBTQI***” to “diversity/identity” to 2015 “wokeness/wokeism”, all of which, she claims, originate in the specific contexts of the USA and which German translators are expected to carry over into their environment. In her estimation this terminology carries “eine wachsende Verachtungs- und Hassbereitschaft, eine fatale Sehnsucht nach einem manichäischen Gut oder Böse, eine Lust am Opfersein und eine Parallellust an Mea-Culpa-Ritualen” (n.p., “a growing willingness to disrespect and hate, a dreadful desire for a manichean good or bad, a love of victimhood and a parallel love for mea-culpa rituals”) that does not speak to German contexts. In her view, the aggressive binaries deriving from “local” American cultural and social politics can be relatively meaningless in German, since they do not originate there. “Sensitive writing” – in regard to sexual difference, subjective identity, race and class – from one specific location – does not apply globally, and Biermann shows how and why. The importation/imposition of English “gender talk” can be fraught, even in so-called ‘western’ locales, with much left un-translated, “vernacularized”, or adapted in different ways.

Nevertheless, regardless of misunderstandings, mismatches and failed “gender mainstreaming” ideas and projects, there is noteworthy activity in transnational “thematic adaptations” – or “tradaptations” – as feminist and other gender-focused materials travel around the world. The next segment of this text describes such a project undertaken in Montreal, Quebec to localize *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, an American women’s reproductive health manual from the 1970s and make it useful material for Quebec-French readers today.

4. A LOCALIZING TRANSNATIONAL, DE-COLONIAL, INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST TRANSLATION PROJECT

The Montreal project is an activist, feminist, intersectional and de-colonialized, transnational but ‘western’ translation project, where the local requirements in regard to the language of gender politics have resulted in interesting contemporary thematic adaptation. In 2017, “La CORPS féministe” set out to produce a special, intersectional and multicultural version of several chapters of the famed *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in French – for Quebec today¹.

¹ Quebec today might be briefly described as a place that is largely French-speaking and promotes the French language and culture, though surrounded by the might of

Over the past 50 years, the Ur-feminist text, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (*OBOS*, 1972 ff.), a handbook on women’s reproductive health, has already been translated and adapted into more than 30 different languages (Pincus 2005; Davis 2007). When “La CORPS” began work, the most recent French version dated from 1977. The group felt that it required updating and “thematic adaptation” to Quebec and the “réalités québécoises” (*ibid.*, 9).

Adaptation processes have long been applied to translations of *OBOS*; women’s reproductive health is, after all, a highly sensitive topic that religious, political and civil authorities are always also involved in. Given this sensitivity, translations of the book generally face different kinds of censorship (Li 2018), various language issues, including a word for “vagina” in certain languages, religious traditions and socio-cultural questions that have always impinged on women’s health and the perception and care of women’s bodies. In translating and studying the translations of *OBOS*, the politics of women’s gendered situations becomes strikingly evident.

The version for *Quebec today* proceeded from the following objective:

Notre travail se fonde sur des principes d’approche globale* de la santé et de déconstruction des systèmes d’oppression (sexisme, colonialisme, racisme, hétéronormativité*, capacitisme*, cisnormativité*, etc.). L’objectif est de permettre aux femmes et aux personnes non-binaires* de faire un choix éclairé en ayant accès à des informations sur la santé et les sexualités qui seraient justes, critiques et indépendantes des intérêts financiers. (*Ibid.*, 10)

This new French version of *OBOS* presents itself as focused on “global” approaches to health, defined in the glossary as a view of health that takes into account environmental, social, psychological and biological spheres of life. The approach deconstructs various “systems of oppression” – sexism, colonialism, racism, heteronormativity (defined as the assumption that heterosexual persons are the norm in society), ableism (defined as discrimination against people living with disabilities), cis-normativity (defined as the assumption that those whose gender identity matches their gender assignment at birth are the norm), and others – on the one hand, and on a variety of gender designations and identities on

North American English language, culture and strongly influenced by its current gender interests. It has a sizeable indigenous population and increasing numbers of French-speaking immigrants – largely from North and West Africa and the Caribbean. In terms of feminist/gender politics, Quebec consists of a culturally, politically and socially very diverse population and readership.

the other. The purpose is to provide information that is honest, critical, and free of financial considerations.

The adapted/translated book that “La CORPS féministe” produced is entitled *Corps Accord. Guide de sexualité positive* (2019), and consists of much more than a direct translation. It is an update for Quebec. It includes an introduction that positions and explains Quebec today in terms of colonialism, religion, the women’s movement, the development of biomedicine and sex education. Scattered throughout the book are vignettes and statements (both signed and anonymous) – some original, some translated – that add personal narratives to the more medical or political texts. Extracts from documents originating in First Nations’ and Muslim women’s groups make it intercultural and transnational while information on intersex and LGBTQ*** movements in Quebec localize it. Actual direct translations of *OBOS* material make up the “translation” part.

In regard to these direct translations, in a first step, four translators produced a French version of this work. In a second step, a number of focus groups consisting of researchers, activists in women’s reproductive health work, and feminist, trans, and other peer organizations studied, critiqued and amended the translations in regard to language-use. In a third step, the feminist publishing house also had its word to say. This complicated and time-consuming process allowed for intersectional concerns and voices to manifest themselves in the text, and address issues of content and language, for as one of the translator/organizers Nesrine Bessaih (2019) points out:

Au Québec, la théorie de l’intersectionnalité se propage dans les milieux universitaires mais se concrétise peu dans la pratique des groupes de femmes.

Les femmes les plus marginalisées (trans, lesbiennes, racisées, autochtones, immigrantes, en situation de handicap, etc.) rencontrent des difficultés à y faire leur place et à y mettre en valeur les enjeux qui les touche plus particulièrement. (Univ. de Paris, December 2019 conference presentation)

Bessaih comments that intersectional issues around indigenous, immigrant, racialized women, or women living with disabilities have been of academic interest in Quebec but have hardly appeared in documentation for everyday use. “La CORPS féministe”, however, considered them of vital importance in this “thematic adaptation” and they strongly affected its language. The first concern was “inclusive language”, especially given the fact that French grammar (like that of many languages) has traditionally privileged masculine forms and rendered the feminine invisible

or at most secondary. Another important issue was “neutral language” which has come into focus with the diversity of genders recognized in Quebec today. This affects not only grammar but individual terms: for example, in the editors’ introduction we find the following statement about the word “femme” (woman):

Tout au long du livre, nous utilisons le terme “femme” d’une manière non essentialiste. A travers ce mot, nous faisons référence à une catégorie sociale et un vécu d’oppression et de discrimination partagé par les personnes qui s’identifient à divers degrés sur le spectre de la féminité, qu’elles soient des femmes cis ou trans, des personnes non binaires ou même des personnes assignées femmes à la naissance mais qui ne se reconnaissent pas dans cette désignation. (*Ibid.*, 13)

Here, the editors explain their non-essentialist use of the word “woman” to refer to any number of persons who identify to some degree with the feminine, but who may be trans-women, non-binary persons, or people refusing the female gender assigned them at birth. This is an important gender-political move, and a controversial one as Zoe Strimpel (2022) has recently pointed out. On the one hand, it insists on the use of the term “woman/women/femme” which has had a complicated recent history in academia, often deemed “essentialist”. On the other, it uses the word “femme” (woman) to evoke victimhood and a life of oppression – for a broad range of gender identifications. And while the term “femme” does occur regularly in the translated text, there are powerful moments when the choice of “epicene” terminology erases it completely.

A most telling example appears in a translated segment referring to women’s experience of menopause where the word “femme” almost disappears.

In the table above (*Fig. 1*), which shows from left to right “the original English”, “the initial translation” and the “final version sent to the publisher” Bessaih (2019) details how the term “woman” in English, moves through direct translation to eventually become “femmes cis* et [...] certaines personnes non-binaires* et hommes trans* [cis women, certain non-binary persons and trans men]”.

This example presents one of several techniques used in the French/Quebec tradaptation and revision of *OBOS* to translate according to local needs, which in this case means including reference to other gender identities, opening up binaries of heteronormativity that are deemed oppressive, and using “neutral language”. The fact that “women” can disappear from a text on “women’s reproductive health” in rather surprising ways is a sign of the contemporary “local” – where the focus has

been as much on intersections of race, class, disability, and gender diversity as it has been on what Strimpel (2020) claims is being systematically ignored: “the concrete, mundane experience of ordinary, boring, bourgeois and working-class and very poor women the world over” (n.p.).

Version originale en anglais	Version traduction initiale (V-2017-04-21)	Version envoyée aux éditrices (V-2018-09-28)
"Menstrual and menopausa! changes, for example, are a normal part of a woman's development." (OBOS 2011: 188)	« Les changements menstruels ou ménopausiques, par exemple, sont un aspect normal du développement de la femme. » (Chapitre 8, page 9)	« Les changements menstruels ou liés à la ménopause, par exemple, font partie de la vie physiologique des femmes cis* et de certaines personnes non-binaires* et hommes trans* » (p. 116)

Figure 1.

With the proliferation of “global feminist gender talk” worldwide and the constantly changing political environments that such talk must face, adaptation processes play an important role. They are flexible, and they adapt this material – sometimes *with* the original source text and sometimes *against* it, and with many variations. For the purposes of transnational feminist translation, “thematic adaptation” seems to be the most logical and useful way to deploy, understand, reflect on and address a *local* politics of language and a *local* politics of gender identity. Where the feminist source texts of the 1970s (such as *OBOS*) provide the basis and the structural bones of an updated, adapted or translated text, the new version is fleshed out in ways that make it useful, meaningful, applicable in the new environment. Adaptation is the only way to make concepts as “nomadic and volatile” as those related to and deriving from English “gender” make sense and work transnationally.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article passe en revue les défis linguistiques et socioculturels liés aux nombreuses tentatives du "féminisme global" de mobiliser des concepts issus de la politique de genre dans le monde entier, les difficultés posées par la traduction du terme "gender" ainsi que par ses dérivés, par exemple *gender mainstreaming*

sont envisagées. L'article aborde ensuite les questions relatives à la traduction et à l'adaptation du "discours international sur le genre" et cite plusieurs débats dans le domaine des études traductologiques féministes transnationales, une approche relativement nouvelle du problème de la communication des questions de "genre" au-delà des frontières culturelles et linguistiques nationales. L'article se termine par la description et l'évaluation d'un projet récent de traduction "localisée", à savoir *Corps Accord. Pour une sexualité positive* (Montréal, Les Éditions du Remue-Ménage, 2019), une traduction féministe intersectionnelle, postcoloniale et transnationale d'une sélection de chapitres de *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, le célèbre manuel féministe américain de santé reproductive des années 1970. L'"adaptation thématique" est proposée et présentée comme une stratégie de traduction appropriée pour de tels matériaux ayant une approche de genre.

