

Feminism and Gender In/equality in Romania

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Abstract:

In Romania nowadays there are a dozen female NGOs, there are women in top positions in the business world, MA and PhD programmes dealing with gender issues, publishing houses like Polirom with a collection of gender studies, etc. And yet, can we really talk about gender equality in Romania? The present paper attempts to answer this question, dealing with notions such as prejudice, stereotype, gender discrimination, etc. in the Romanian society.

Key words: gender, prejudice, discrimination, in/equality, stereotype

Preamble

The present paper tries to look into the issue of feminism and gender equality – or would it be more appropriate to say gender inequality – in the Romanian society. At a first look, the answer to the question *Can we talk about feminism in Romania?* appears to be an easy one. In Romania nowadays, there are several female NGOs, women occupy top positions in the business world and compete with men in fields that were previously occupied by men only; there are MA and PhD programmes dealing with gender studies within several Universities in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, Iași, etc.; Polirom publishes a collection of gender studies which comprises over twenty titles, etc. And yet, can we really talk about feminism in Romania? The first part of the paper endeavours to answer this question, while trying to track down the history of feminism in Romania.

Feminism in Romania

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Feminism represents a plea for women's rights. It has as its cornerstone the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way. It starts from the assumptions that women are systematically oppressed and that gender relationships are not biological and immutable. Feminism is "a defensive and offensive reaction to misogyny." (Miroiu 2004:27) and demands that women's experiences be treated the same as men's. Misogyny refers to fear, hate or contempt towards women. Such feelings are rooted in the biological determinism theory. According to this theory, since women can give birth, they are seen as closer to animals than men, therefore they are less rational; they are emotional and unpredictable. When it was eventually accepted that it is not biology that counts but rather the environment and the way in which we are educated, misogyny switched its target: it's not women that are contemptible, but the concept of being feminine. Men were seen as the norm and women as a deviation from the norm.

Misogyny is closely related to prejudices, sexism and discrimination. Sexism put forward the idea of male supremacy, and a patriarchal society reinforces this belief.

Romanian feminism has a long standing tradition, though it was somehow kept in the dark. It first appeared in our country in the second half of the 19th century, in parallel with other European countries, but also reflecting local social, cultural and political realities. The *First Wave Feminism* in Romania was synchronic with the western one, due to educated women with access to international information. It remained by excellence a movement of the elite, though it promoted equal rights for all categories of women. It was mainly an elitist movement because industrialism affected only a small proportion of the population – before communism 80% of the population of Romania lived in rural areas, therefore they had limited access to education, which made any attempt for a feminist movement quite impossible.

Among the outstanding feminine voices of the period one should mention Calypso Botez, Alexandrina Cantacuzino, and Eleonora Strătilescu. They fought for complete political rights for women, equal pay for equal work, access to education and career, equality between the spouses, equal civil and political rights. The Constitution of

1920 is the most democratic of all of Romania's constitutions from the pre-communist period. Nevertheless, it was only in the Constitution of 1946 that the universal right to vote, regardless of sex, was stipulated.

The *Second Wave Feminism* could not develop simultaneously with the western movement because of communism's double role: that of support and oppression. The main support was the implication of the state in the raising of children through nurseries and kindergartens and access to education and work. The oppression consisted in suspending one's basic rights, including that of reproduction.

Communist equalitarian ideology resulted – among others – in the fact that women were snowed under with work: they worked together with men on the labour market and at home they continued to take care of the household, to raise children, etc. In conclusion, an equality in one field (in the field of work) led to accentuated differences in another field.

During the communist era, due on the one hand to their egalitarian ideology and on the other hand to their rejection of any other ideology, the feminist movement could not develop further. Feminist voices were rare (Ecaterina Oproiu, for example) and the few feminist organisations were controlled and manipulated by the Communist Party.

Communism, while forbidding any form of sexual discrimination, annihilated feminism and forced it to silence. Therefore, because of communism, the second wave feminism failed from the point of view of historical integration.

As a result, it is no wonder that the *Third Wave Feminism* in Romania was some sort of hybrid between the characteristic of the second wave and the new concepts of the third wave. Post-communist transition led to a transformation of gender relations on a public and private scale. During communism, gender relations were controlled by political pressures. Communism did not have a feminist agenda, but a homogenising, equalitarian one; the division of housework remained purely a theory, without changing the relations between women and men and men's dominance over women. So the patriarchal system of values within the family may be regarded as a communist legacy.

In many countries, getting rid of the communist indoctrination was synonymous with a return to tradition. This was more than obvious in the Romanian villages, where the main moral landmark remained the church, which continued to play an important part in gender relations:

In today's Romanian society, it's more convenient to be a man than a woman. As a man your income is higher, you do less housework, you have a privileged position in the family, you have less responsibilities towards your family, especially towards your children, you are appreciated in society, you are more present in public life, can get involved in politics and participate in decisions regarding what's happening in society. (Pasti 2003: 173)

The fall of communism led to a rejection of the equalitarian ideology, which in turn led to women's economic dependence on men, since on average women's salaries were three times lower than men's. (Gender Barometer) This resulted in what is called modern patriarchy, a step back – in what gender relationships are concerned – from the pre-communist and communist period.

Is Feminism Possible in a Patriarchal Society?

Every society is to a certain extent patriarchal; each society encourages differences between men and women, in the way they are educated, treated, taught, etc. Romania remains a patriarchal society, where women are perceived mainly as wives and mothers and are denied access to more powerful positions in the business world. In an attempt to align with the laws and legislations of the European Community, the majority of groups within our country have been encouraged to fight discrimination, inequality, prejudices and so on.

As far as the group of women is concerned, they seem to have resigned themselves and have passively accepted long-accepted stereotypes: they have silently continued their established path, becoming mothers and housewives and filling positions in the field of work that have long been identified with women: those of

teachers, nurses, top models, movie stars, to give but a few examples. There are some lucky women who have made it in the business world, who have managed to build a career, but at home they continue and are expected to be mothers and housewives, which may very well take a heavy toll on their professional life, since it prevents them from advancing as quickly as their male colleagues. Therefore, no matter how free, emancipated, or smart might a woman be, eventually she realises that men have got the upper hand and therefore, in the end, she resigns to this idea.

In what the family is concerned, the fight for human rights seems to stop at its door. A high proportion of the population lives in rural areas where traditional patriarchal relations survive, and domestic violence is common. In the year 2000, the Foundation for an Open Society launched the Gender Barometer, a programme whose aim was to analyse gender centred public policies in the Romanian society. 1839 people aged 18 and over from 18 cultural areas took part in the pool. When the issue of battered partners came up, more than 50% of the interviewed people admitted to having heard about such cases. When asked who should intervene when a partner is battered, 37% considered that they have to deal with their problems by themselves, while 28% considered that relatives or the police should intervene. "Interfering with family business, even in cases of domestic violence, cannot be justified on the basis of protecting one's personal integrity, because patriarchal cultures regard the woman as a wife obeying her husband, and not as a human being endowed with the same natural rights." (Despina Dumitrica)

Mass-media reinforces this patriarchal ideology, impregnating the population with ideas and images that present women as sexy and available; over and over again the ads feature women raising kids, cooking, washing or making themselves beautiful for their men.

Gender studies face two main problems in Romania nowadays. First of all, the preoccupation for gender studies continues to be seen as an 'exotic' issue rather than as a local one and secondly – and most importantly – feminism in Romania seems to lack clear directions and objectives: in our country we cannot talk about an actual feminist

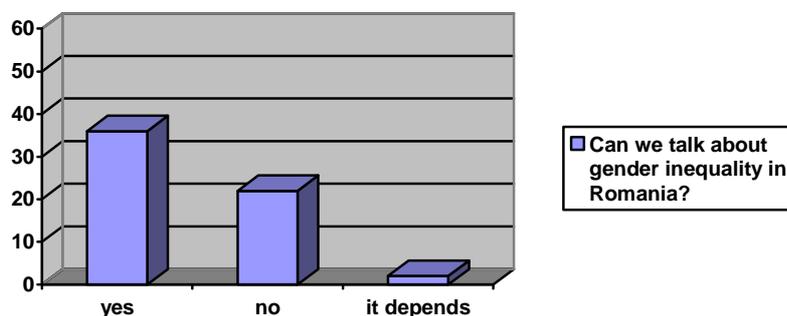
movement due to our social and political background, therefore the movement that took place in our country was based on what may be called “imported objective,” that did not have much to do with our experiences and problems but with models borrowed from the West, models that did not fit our reality.

Pasti (2003:92) concluded that gender inequality is the last inequality in Romania; we live in a modern society that will treat men and women differently just because they are men and women. We are talking here about an implicit ideology, reinforced by the church and tradition and accepted by the majority, an ideology that claims the superiority of men based on higher incomes, higher positions, more access to political / social decisions, etc. “In Romania there are two peoples: the women and the men and the way they interact seem to accentuate the differences between them.”

Gender In/Equality – a Case Study

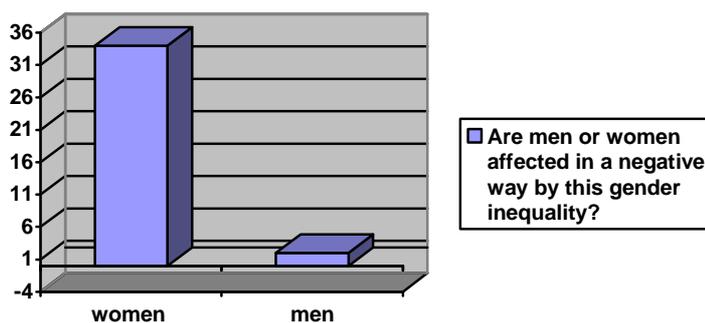
In order to find out people’s opinion insofar as gender differences are concerned, if they are indeed aware of gender inequalities, I addressed four questions to a number of 60 people, aged 18 and over, higher-educated, and from the urban area. Here are the findings:

1. In your opinion, can we talk about gender inequality in Romania?



36% of the respondents consider that we are dealing with gender inequality in Romania, 22% consider that gender inequality is no longer a reality in our country, while 2% consider that it depends on the situation, the persons involved, etc.

2. If yes, who do you think is affected in a negative way by this gender inequality: men or women?



Of the 36 respondents that consider that there is gender inequality in Romania, 34% consider that women are negatively affected by this inequality, while 2% believe that it is men that are affected.

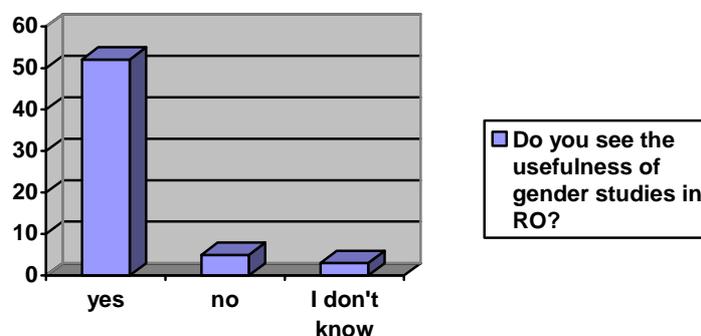
3. Think of a situation in which you / an acquaintance of yours have been discriminated on gender grounds.

Most situations refer to job interviews, where sometimes men were favoured, just because they were men and they were seen as more fit for the job but sometimes women seem to be favoured, but always due to their physical appearance, not due to their intellectual or practical abilities; other situations refer to jobs in which women receive less money than men for the same type of work.

Another situation refers to the prejudice according to which certain jobs are not 'appropriate' for women; since women are good nurses, teachers, etc., they shouldn't go after jobs like lawyers, doctors, etc.

When women have to miss work because their kids are sick, they are seen as unprofessional, whereas when men do it, they are admired for their paternal qualities.

4. Do you see the usefulness of gender studies in the Romanian society?



Of the 60 respondents, 52 thought that gender studies will eventually pay off in our society, 5 thought they were not necessary and 2 were not sure about the usefulness of such studies.

Instead of a Conclusion

Gender inequalities are a reality in our country. The Gender Barometer reflects the existing stereotypes in the Romanian society: men are less suited to raise children, men are considered the head of the family (this stereotype is so deeply rooted in our patriarchal society that even if the man is financially supported by the woman, he is still considered the head of the family), women are responsible for household tasks, men should bring home the money, women are more sensitive, they are not interested in

public affairs, they are too busy with housework, which prevents them from taking part in decisions, women are supposed to follow their men, etc.

Patriarchal societies have as their cornerstone the unchallenged authority of men, so it is no surprise that such stereotypes continue to exist. The first step that needs to be taken to change this reality is to change the way women perceive themselves. They continue passively to identify themselves with the mainstream stereotype of mother-wife-housewife, making no attempts to fight it. Women have to stand up for themselves, or else gender issues in Romania will continue to exist only in surveys and studies.

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