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Social and Economic Justice

The Costless State Feminism in Romania
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Small talks:
1. What kind of rights do we have? Let me tell you: The right to work, to be wives, to raise children, to cook, to do laundry. These are our rights. E. I. 2004
2. Discussion to the meeting of the Romanian Coalition GEN (Gender, Equity, Nondiscrimination):
   MM:
   - All the feminized domains are at the bottom of the public budget. We must ask the Government about the level of the budgetary salaries within different domains, about the criteria used, as well as the policies concerning equal pay for equal work. What’s happened now is simply unjust. For e.g. policeman working in an office earns 5 times more than a teacher.
   The GEN people:
   - No! What you proposed to us sounds feminist and we are afraid of this label. It sounds like a fight and women are peacekeepers. And it also sounds like a political vindication and we are NGO’s, thus apolitical.

Bucharest, February, 19, 2005
That’s why we pray EU! (MM)

Abstract

The socialist economy was based on socially extended firms. State “firms” played many social roles, apart from the economic ones. Their deconstruction meant not just a deep changing in propriety, but also a deconstruction of a way of life including the social safety net and the support for raising children.

Men and women have equal access to higher education. Higher education has a feminization tendency. But curriculums ignore the gender dimension of scholarly topics and research. Openness to women’s access to education is obvious, as well as the blindness to gender and women’s issues. Men predominate in the the prestigious well-paid academic positions and sexist and ageist practices are widespread.

From a political point of view, men enjoyed preferential treatment as privileged victims of transition. Also, because their access to resources was exclusive, they enjoyed a special advantage as favorite clients. Although women have greater access to job opportunities, most earn very little in comparison to men due to the political hierarchy of budgetary incomes, to lower paid jobs in textiles, tourism, and commerce as well as to the “gray market” jobs with little social protection. Most women do not earn enough to survive and thus became dependent on men. To overcome this poverty or just their dependency, they became new agricultural hand pickers, cleaners, domestic servants, baby-sitters, or even prostitutes, mainly in the EU states. Their chances in the Western labor market are better than for men. Internal media encourages women to sell sex, youth and beauty, and men to sell mind and muscles.

With few exceptions, “equal opportunities” is still an empty normative phrase. The reasons for this emptiness lay in the fact that the state mechanically adopted the normative provisions within the EU Aquis communautaire, ignoring all the internal, rather “shy”, lobby and know-how and, until recently, in most cases forgetting to include a budget for such public institutions and policies. That is why I call it a “costless state feminism” as a consequence of a “room-service feminist agenda”.

1 She was quoted by Valentina Pricopie, 2004, p. 79.
I. Why has the safety net disappeared?

The falling of the communist socially extended economy

(Socialism: social rights gains and loses)

One of the primary mistaken assumptions in the strategies adopted by international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) aimed at directing East European governments towards market economies was the belief that it is very simple to privatize state industries and services. They assumed that the socialist economy was based on state firms, which were equivalent to private ones. If this were the case, it would be easy to transfer ownership from the state in order to gain efficiency. In reality, a socialist firm was not the opposite of a capitalist one. Socialism created a *socially extended economy* (see the volume edited by Miroiu A, 2002), in which a person could live his or her whole life within a socialist “firm.” Such a “firm” was an individual’s provider for life. One could be born at the firm’s hospital, grow up in the firm’s apartment, raised in the firm’s nursery, educated in the firm’s school, sleep in its dormitories, work at the firm for a whole career, spend free time at the firm’s playgrounds, resort hotels, cultural houses, eat in its “restaurants,” repair shoes there, be appreciated or punished there, meet colleagues, neighbors, spouses, friends and enemies in the same small world, raise children, retire, and even be buried by comrades at the firm. There were only a few things omitted from this self-sufficient socio-economic community: shopping and cemeteries. Women shared this life with men, except that they shouldered a double burden. Almost no other options existed: working in a state “firm,” even as a school teacher or medical doctor, was not a right, but a duty.

The state “firms” protected women as workers, mothers and caretakers, and even as wives (from domestic violence) in a very direct manner. Every firm had a nursery for the worker’s offspring and a political organization that cared for the “healthy families.” The price of this security and social protection was the sacrifice of personal freedom, self-assertion, the
relationship between merit and income, the ownership of mental and physical capacities, including the reproductive ones, as Romania had a sad reputation in pronatalist policies (see Kligman, 1998, Baan, 2002) and, last but not least, a lack of competition and personal welfare.

Contrary to its egalitarian ideology, socialism had built its own hierarchies, in which gender played an important role. Although formal inequality was eliminated, under communism a patriarchal regime was formed under the hegemony of the paternalist state, and its gender policies reproduced men’s dominance in society’s hierarchy of labor (see Corrin, 1992, Funk, Miller, 1993, Verdery, 1994, Miroiu, 1999, Vincze, 2002, Pasti, 2003).

After socialism collapsed, state firms declined in terms of the reliability of their safety net and education provision. Women were far more affected by this decline than men. Nurseries, as well as social assistance in terms of housing, education, safe playgrounds for children, buses, and cheap holidays all simply ended. Traditionally, the state firms had mediated the so-called “state support.” As a result of pressure from trade unions, the firms were retained for some time in order to ensure men’s incomes and their status as breadwinners, but not to provide social services. Men succeeded in maintaining the gender hierarchies in the economy and in the public sector for more than a decade. After the collapse of communism, most individuals, especially women, were left on their own, without state assistance in child rearing, day care, or care for the elderly and without any knowledge of how to claim their rights, volunteer in associations or join together in collective action.

2. Women’s access to education and the neglect of gender and women’s issues in education

(Women’s access to education)
The Romanian system is coeducational at all levels of general and higher education (with the exception of specific fields, such as Theology). General education is balanced in terms of the gender of students. The main differences are at university-preparatory high schools, where girls prevail, and vocational schools, where boys prevail.

As a result of the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of sex within the teaching and learning process and the principle of equal opportunities for both sexes, educational regulations and policies are not gender sensitive. Despite this fact, general education is overwhelmingly feminized in terms of teaching staff (73%). The educational system also looks to be friendlier to girls regarding their performance (See Miroiu M, 2004 b).

Textbooks are the main promoters of gender stereotypes. Most models of success are masculine. There are almost no feminine success models. The ideal masculine and feminine types are constructed in a conservative manner. What women do, men do not (see Dragomir ET all, 2002). References to specific gender experiences are nonexistent in textbooks. They present gender in a neutral and disengaged manner: the textbooks do not mention the double burden, housework and domestic violence, or single parents’ problems. The general educational system forms good citizens but poorly-prepared parents, spouses, partners, brothers, sisters, and friends. Education for private life is not an important issue for the general curriculum (see Grünberg, Stefanescu, 2002). After the collapse of communism, only civic culture and religious education were considered “the new emergencies.”

Women’s access to higher education has increased continuously (in 2003 women made up almost 54% of the student body) due to several factors: the decline of the Technical Universities, the appearance of private universities oriented mainly to Humanities and Social Sciences, and the unintentional woman-friendly character of the admission exams (see Miroiu M. 2003). There is balanced access to the MA programs, but a prevalence of men in PhD programs and in leading positions at universities. According to a familiar “tradition,” once
there is a large population of women somewhere, they will on the lower rungs of each professional status group and their work is treated as less important than men’s. For example, in Romanian higher education in 2005 there are only 2 female rectors (presidents of universities) out of 76.

Women are encouraged to continue their education, but, to a larger extent than men, after graduation they have little access to well-paid jobs. In this context, occupational status rather than higher education brings high incomes.

3. Gender privileges and favoritism, or why equal opportunity is an empty normative phrase.

(New opportunities for employment)

Men experienced the transition as privileged victims. Because they had almost exclusive access to monetary resources and power, they also experienced preferential treatment as favorite clients. Women managed to become neither privileged victims nor favorite clients. Along with ethnic minorities, they were only later, under international pressure, added to the “victim agenda.” The disappearance of women’s trade unions has led to the transfer of women’s employment to the new capitalist areas of the economy. The preservation of the power of male trade unions led to the retention of men as workers in the socialist, state-controlled industries (see Pasti, 2003, Miroiu, 2004).

The interest groups that mattered in the privatization process were the unions of the state industries, the privileged victims, or the favorite political clients of the state (les nouveaux riches). Women became individual agents, unlike men, who remained collective agents.

Men are represented both by unions and by political parties. None of the trade unions or political parties was or is led by a woman. In the Parliament of 2005, 10.6% of members are
women and at the local level they hold 4.6% of the seats. Women’s political loneliness has its eloquent illustration in the term *housewife* as a “private” umbrella for a political problem: the hidden, unwilling unemployment that affects a new mass category created in the transition².

As employees in the free market economy, women are winners among losers. They have arrived at this “privileged” status by several means: through the prioritized privatization of industries and services that employed women (textiles, food industry, commerce, tourism), through migration, as more than 55% of migrants are women (possibly they are the highest contributors to GNP), and as merchandise, in the role of “sexual objects.” In the private sector capitalism uses women precisely because this labor market is unregulated by the state, in spite of the “updated” regulations that protect labor according to EU standards. Women receive no respect as protesters and rights claimers (see for example, the second “small talk”). They are helpless victims of their new owners’ abuse and patronage. In the sex industry the labor force is almost exclusively female, while the capital, management and consumers are almost exclusively male. Approximately 70,000 men run this “gray market.” They employ 1 million women, who are generally young, and for whom any small salary is better than nothing.

Women are paying indirectly, through taxes and political passivity, for sustaining this artificial gender hierarchy, which has very little to do with the market. They have become dependent on men not because of the vicissitudes of the free market, as is usually the case in the West, but because of state policies regarding budget allocation (much more for the secret services army and police, than for education, health care and administration) and the political hierarchy of incomes.

The wage policies meant to ensure the continued superiority of the industrial male worker vis-à-vis the female worker were replaced by wage policies to ensure the superiority of the male worker employed by the state vis-à-vis the female worker employed by the state. This patriarchal wage relation, strongly supported by unions, whose protest movements have always taken as a model the socialist wage hierarchies, was easily reproduced by all the

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² For a larger survey in Eastern Europe gender political representation see Matland, R. and Kathleen Montgomery (Eds), 2000
governing powers that followed the last decade... What these regimes did was to subsidize not only their workplaces, but also the social prestige of some men at the top of the worker wage hierarchy. (Pasti, 2003, p. 196)

4. Gender, jobs, age and attractiveness

(Women’s opportunity for employment)

a. Employment opportunities:

In the circumstances that I have described, women have greater access to jobs, but at the same time they have less access to money. There are many reasons why men have less access to jobs. The most important is that the de-industrialization process was accompanied by the illusion that the state will take care of the male-dominated economy forever. This illusion nourished conservatives on the left (see Miroiu, 1999). Consequently, compared to women, men were not morally prepared for the new sectors and market economy (the banking system is an exception). The digital economy and the development of the third sector leave no room for a strong gender division of work in men’s favor. In addition, many jobs created in the entertainment industry are more accessible for women as sex objects (see also Einhorn, 1993, Johnson and Robinson, 2004, Pasti, 2003, Miroiu, 2004). Women’s employment rate is around 49% of the total active population and is increasing steadily (from 46% in 1995). Women’s unemployment was 10% compared to 11% for men, but the GNP’s redistribution definitely favours men (UNDP, 2003, p. 97).

b. Age and attractiveness

Age is an important factor. Generally speaking, women applying for jobs should be less than thirty (see Marinescu, 2004, p.64).

Attractiveness also plays a crucial role in the new market economy (see also: Daskalova, 2002, Johnson J. and Jean Robinson (Eds), 2004). Recent research on gender and mass media in Romania (see Grünberg ed. 2005) reveals that women are perceived as visible bodies and invisible minds. Youth and beauty are seen as the prime, if not the only, recipe for success.
within the job market. In the media women sell sex and hands, while men sell mind and muscles. The media do not give any attention to women’s intellect, apart from fashion and spicy stories, until they are over 50 years old. The women who appear on television are recruited from top models, young singers and famous mistresses (over 70%). Students and professional women had only 0.68% of TV appearances, 6 times less than delinquents’ and 10 times less than sexy models.

5. Social protection for whom?

(The current condition for the social safety net for women)

Maternity leave is 126 working days, and parental leave for childcare is two years and has the same value regardless of income (see The Laws 210/1999 and the Law 19/2000). The value is the equivalent of 200 USD a month, higher than the minimum wage. For a young woman this is very tempting. But in practice the price of childbirth is high. In spite of the Laws against Discrimination and Equal Opportunities many employers refuse to hire young married women, and they ask for a certification of non-pregnancy when women apply for a job. When women return to work after maternity leave, some of them have to take a job examination. The employer usually demonstrates through the examination that women are no longer able to perform their job properly. Just 6 cases were reported to the National Council of appeals against these sorts of cases (see Marinescu and Pricopie, 2004, pp. 28-30). An appeal is considered a Don Quixote strategy (“a fight against a windmill,” Marinescu, 2004, p. 34) because women lack money for a trial and the knowledge of and trust in women’s NGO’s, their solidarity is low, and a sense of collective action is still missing (see Gender Barometer, 2000). Until now, women trust the public sector more: “the state is not playing with the social rights as the private owners did” (Pricopie, 2004, p. 68). Men can afford to work more than the legal time because they are “abstract parents” and according to cultural tradition, they have only a vague moral and effective responsibility for children.
Men elect to take parental leave when they have a safe job and a lower income than their partner. But the choice is painful. Such men experience a backlash to this decision. Other men question their manhood, and women are suspicious about men’s ability to care for children (Marinescu, Pricopie, 204, p. 31).

Affordable childcare services have disappeared for most parents. The fees for such services are the equivalent of the minimum wage. The usual alternative is “the institution of grandparents,” if there are any (see Stefan, 2004). Child subsidies are universal, but small and ineffective (5 USD a month). A popular child support program is the so-called “milk and pretzel breakfast,” which was introduced in 2002 for all children enrolled in general education.

There are few affordable mental health institutions. Those who benefit live mostly in urban, developed areas. Popular culture perceives mental problems as shameful and a form of madness. People want to avoid being labeled as mentally ill, even if they suffer from depression.

In conclusion, most public money has been designated for the protections of the adult male population employed in heavy industry. The proportion of retired people is 50% more than the proportion of active workers. By redistribution, the amount of income designed to ensure social protection for the classical “needy” is very low. If we take into account the “capture of the state” by groups situated at the intersection of political power and money, we will notice that there is very little left and that proper protection is merely a slogan.

6. Room-service feminism, showroom gender politics and costless state feminism

(Social and employment protection are internally or externally defined by EU or UN?)

I define “Room-service feminism” as the imposition of a gender sensitive legislation in CEE through the authority of international political actors, in particular European ones, before the internal public recognition of such a need. These international political actors are usually the EU, the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank, and even NATO (concerning women in the military force). It is a strategy of emancipation from above, which
in fact covers the weakness of a post-communist society: the acceptance of “integration” as a messianic solution for all social evils and forms of injustice.... This kind of feminism has become a superficial substitute for the development of local political feminism. The backlash against feminism in the West, along with the post-feminism promoted by the media, in turn affects negatively the development of a political feminism in CEE (Miroiu, 2004 p. 126).

In the last five years Romania adopted The Law of Parental Leave (1998), The Law for Preventing and Combating All forms of Discrimination (2000), The Law of Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (2002), The Law for Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence (2003). In the last two years, marital rape and sexual harassment were recognized and criminalized. At the end of 2003 Romania adopted a new Constitution that recognizes equal opportunities between men and women. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the new laws, two National agencies were created: The National Council for Preventing and Combating all forms of Discrimination (NCPCD) (2002) and the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men (NAEOWM) (December, 2003). In my opinion this is just showroom gender politics as well as costless state feminism. In fact, very few men accept the parental leave. The NCPCD solved just six cases of gender discrimination, most of them concerning pregnancy, and the other laws have no budget. There are only four shelters for battered women, they are not properly organized, and NAEOWM still exists only on paper: it has no budget, location, and staff.

Conclusions

The collapse of communism was for many women the collapse of a way of life that was more comfortable from a social point of view for women as workers and mothers, but it affected their self-assertion as professionals, humans, and women. They had very few choices well-defined duties. Now they have many choices and very little support as workers and mothers. Women’s political loneliness affects them much more than they realize. Imported
equal opportunity norms are necessary, but insufficient conditions, for social and economic justice.


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