

Mihaela Miroiu

Mihaela Miroiu (born in 1955), Professor at the National University of Political and Administrative Studies Bucharest, is one of the most important feminist scholars in the Eastern Europe. She initiated the first courses of Gender Studies in Romania, contributed to the feminism activism movement and published numerous volumes on feminist ethics and philosophy. In the most famous book of her, "The road to autonomy. Feminist Political Theories", she expounds the historical evolution of feminism and feminist political theories and most important, she explores the developments of gender policies in the context of communism and post-communism

What did the experience of transition mean for the Romanian women? How did it impact them?

I would call the '90s - 2000 transition an undefined post-communist transition, as all one knew was that one form of society and one political regime was collapsing and another one was being created. If we're talking about a transition as a passage to something new, namely to a western type of society, a liberal-capitalist democracy, then we are talking about the 2000-2006 period. Thus, if since December 2000 we began the accession to the EU process, the whole 2000-2006 is a period of transition itself. So, we have a post-communist transition and a transition towards EU accession. That makes two transitions. And therefore, I can say that different things happened in these two transitions.

The post-communist transition meant the following things for women: First, the idea of gender equality, promoted by communism, completely collapsed because right after the fall of the communist regime the political representation of women became 3.5% at national level and 1.6% at local level. Therefore, politically speaking, women became completely unimportant and their interests weren't represented. This is the first aspect. A second aspect would be that, with the fall of the communist industry, specifically the state industry, the whole social network related to it fell, namely the nurseries and kindergartens which belonged to the industry, which meant most of the nurseries and kindergartens existent. The state's support in children's upbringing fell through. This affected women as the central idea which still dominated society back then and still does today is that in terms of looking after, the child is the responsibility of the mother only.

The not-so-bad things that happened during that period are rather connected to the transition towards the capitalist economy, that is the fall of the so-called "heavy industries": mining, smelting, machinery, oil refining. So, the process of massive deindustrialization affected men. The industries in which women worked, so-called "light industries", like food and textile industries or those producing objects related to these industries, as well as commerce and tourism which were dominated by women, were privatized. Therefore, women's adjustment to the market economy was faster than that of men and, practically speaking, in this first decade those who created that massive GDP were women. The GDP that women produced was then redistributed as unemployment benefits, compensatory leaves etc. to the men from the heavy industries. So, women kept their workplaces while men didn't really. The women contributed to the GDP and earned money, their money were taken and redistributed to those affected by

deindustrialization. Thus, they did not lose jobs or status, but they lost money. This is where the financial imbalance between them and men began.

At the same time, we must state a few important aspects. Politically the women were alone, not represented. Along with the transition towards market, the trade unions disappeared and their interests were simply not taken into account. As a result, the women had no protection from any trade union whatsoever. The feminist organizations emerged later and they did not appear in order to intervene in the socio-political life of women but rather in their education, their emancipation, the civil rights, this whole process that, intellectually speaking, mostly took place in the '70s. At an intellectual, civic and political level, there were some attempts at creating a form of support such as the "222" group for political equality in the Romanian Parliament. There were certain programs designed to help them, mostly made by the UN. Later the first feminist organizations emerged and women's organizations began to develop, but this whole movement did not, in fact, impact their political status and interests.

As a result - on the first occasion when we could see where we stand from a statistical point of view and to create a barometer of the gender relations in Romania in the year 2000 - what we discovered was a patriarchy rooted in the minds of the people deeper than we ever thought. This is because in communism, in terms of private relations, nobody tried to change it and after the fall of the communist regime the most influential institution remained largely the church which strongly supported the re-legitimization of the traditional patriarchy. So this is what the women got: all they won was a lighter transition towards market economy.

Did the ordinary women feel frustrated realizing that along with the transition they have lost the kind of equality that they were somehow having during the communism?

I think the main frustration - based on the researches I have conducted especially in deindustrialized areas - was that their men did not work anymore or that their men entered a huge work crisis or an identity crisis, that what happened to the men would later end in excessive mortality and great identity crises. Usually, when women lose work places, they don't manifest extreme identity crises characterized by non-sense because their identity doesn't revolve exclusively around professional identity in an "I either have that job or I'm nothing" sort of way. The women always have an extra purpose or they feel like they do which led to men losing on average 3 to 4 years of their life compared to women. This was not a win for women but a loss for men compared to women. That was the first thing to frustrate them. The second thing that seemed to frustrate them, according to my research was the rather conflictual and merciless way of making politics as women felt, from a moral point of view alienated from the world of politics. They considered that as long as politics can't take a more cooperative and ethical form, they have nothing to do there. In a way, from all I have seen, women would be more ready for a stage of consolidated democracy than men through their male representatives. This frustrates them a lot, this political immorality and its indifference to the interests of the citizens plus the extremely conflictual manner in which politics happen. Sure, another frustrating issue is the absence of support in children's upbringing, the lack of access to nurseries and kindergartens as well, given the fact that they are mostly private and pretty expensive.

What are the differences that you notice between the different generations of women - those socialized in the communist era and the younger ones who were socialized in the transitional period?

Now I will be talking specifically about a study which included 101 women from both urban and rural areas of the Hunedoara county, part of three main generations: one generation which we have called the “communist generation”, the one which lived most of its life under the communist regime, that’s my mother’s generation, the transitional generation and my generation as well, and the generation of democracy, your generation [those who lived only few years of childhood under the communism]. We worked with research concerning all three generations and we noticed the differences between them. My mother’s generation, the one we called the generation of communism, was somehow pleased with communism and the main satisfaction was the fact that they had access to education, housing provided by the state and services. Generally, because 80% of Romania’s population lived in the rural areas, they had little access to education. They were very happy with the possibility of getting an education. They consider this to be the single most important benefit they got during the communist era. In Romania, women weren’t economically dependent to men on the communist regime as they have always worked shoulder to shoulder to men, both in the non-monetary peasant economy and after they all got a job in communism. So, it’s not like communism came, took all the housewives and gave them work to do. It took equally peasant women and peasant men equally and built an industry with all of them. So in this sense, the main reasons for their gratitude were education and the urban lifestyle.

For the generation of their daughters, education and the urban lifestyle were natural things. Now the gratitude towards the regime is gone, completely, because this broad access was already granted and this is where the frustration emerged from, as the majority of them lived their youth in the ‘80s, with the general state of shortage, the economic crisis, the consequences of Decree 660, which forbade abortions, the complete absence of contraceptive methods and a strong state of frustration from all points of view, given the fact that the majority of the population was now pretty well educated. This is the generation which found nothing good in the past.

On the other hand, it was the generation which had to make the first great transition and thus its greatest frustration is related to the fact that most of these women, especially in deindustrialized towns, had to become a kind of ‘Jill of all trades’, to be both the men and the women, to be able to earn money too, to change in order to keep up with the world in which they lived and, in my opinion, it was a generation with a high endurance and a great capacity to adapt. Everything that has substantially changed in Romania during this first decade of the post-communist era and in the first half of the next decade has done so because of the people in this generation. If it was a good change or a bad one, this is a whole other topic, but these were the agents of change. In smaller towns, for instance, things won’t go the way they do in Bucharest - that is creating NGOs, new political parties and new industries. In smaller towns the main concern, for example, is that doctors must re-specialize as new medical specializations appear and they must learn something new, they must privatize their practices and this applies to teachers as well because the subjects and the curriculum change. When switching from a communist commerce and tourism system to a capitalist market one which must be filled with temptations for the consumers, the changes one must undergo are massive. A woman must be able to support a family mostly on her own since her husband is now

unemployed and she has to work double, even triple shift to be able to make ends meet. On top of all that, one must change and learn new skills. It's a generation that I think was strong enough to even make a change, as much as they could.

And then there's the next generation which either had nothing to do with communism or was 2, 3 or 4 years old when the regime fell and which considers that life was pretty good back then because the state gave you a job and a house. There are all kinds of mythologies in a sense that you could ask me: "If the state, after you graduate from the faculty of philology, the English section, would send you to the Pocreaca village [middle of nowhere] where there wasn't even a train, would put that address on your ID and you were kept in that village like a prisoner with no house, no train and no possibility of leaving, was it better that they gave you a work place?" It's all these illusions regarding what communism actually was.

But this is not what concerns me the most. What did was that when asked: "If your husband would have earned enough so as you wouldn't have to work too, would you have stayed home?" the answer of those in the communist generation and the transitional generation was a firm "no". They couldn't even imagine not being independent. On the other hand, many of those in the young generation answered "yes". What struck me was a feeling of a backwards step in terms of emancipation. How is it possible for the generation of their grandmothers and mothers to be so strongly independent while their (grand)daughters would willingly accept a state of dependence because it's "trendy" or because it is a cultural model which they got from the fiction of some glossy magazine. I never quite understood this.

Of course, it is a very interesting generation from other points of view, but a generation which seemed less interested in politics, less involved in civic matters and with a tendency towards abandonment and dependency. This situation had both surprised and saddened me. I was used to the women in my generation, women who were strong, independent, autonomous, which involve others in the process of emancipation, which can't even imagine not being independent. Back then, mothers and grandmothers were like that and most of them would choose that path. When you belong to certain groups where the need for liberation, for being yourself and being autonomous is strong, depending on a man wouldn't cross your mind, but when you're not part of such groups and you're only connected to such channels which promote the Barbie model, or even luxury prostitution, the woman who managed to get her hands on a wealthy man appears to be the epitome of success.

Do you believe that the transition process in Romania is over?

Yes, I think it's over and it came to an end in 2016 like it wouldn't have considered it to be over in 2015. Because in 2015 I could complain when looking at the democratization index which the Economist Intelligence Unit makes every year. I was looking at the hierarchy of consolidated, liberal and non-liberal democracies, hybrid and authoritarian regimes and Romania was taking a more humble place between liberal and non-liberal democracies but it was still far from the consolidated area. But when you see what happened in 2016 in the old consolidated democracies and what foolish election choices were made by the people whom one thought that they have a strong democratic political culture, like it happened in highly powerful state such as the United States of America or in the oldest European democracy, namely the Great Britain, you start wondering where does Romania stand. And I want to say

that as long as in 2016 Romanians did not elect extremist politicians, even if the European context is a strange one including in our neighboring states like Hungary or Poland, let alone in consolidated democracies, I think that, in terms of democracy, Romania looked a lot better in 2016 than many consolidated democracies. Regarding the GDP, of course, we have a big historical discrepancy, discrepancy which cannot be overcome in a very short period of time, but which is not as big as it was 5 years ago or 10 years ago and so on. This discrepancy is getting smaller. I think we can safely say that Romania has a historical delay and has a hard time catching up but it set off with it starting with the first period of modernization at the middle of the 19th century and kept on like that until now. It now finds itself in the best situation possible in all its history. So if we compare Romania now to its history and the Romanian democracy to other democracies right now, I am not pessimistic about it. On the contrary! There's another important thing about democracy: Romania had the most tyrannical communist regime in the Eastern Europe apart from Albania. It seems that our memory on authoritarianism is still vivid enough to allow us to have the antidote and to be very precautious when it comes to such matters.

What about the backwards steps on democracy that are made nowadays in Romania, as the attempts of restricting abortions, these being one of the main gain after the communist fall?

First of all, from my point of view, any kind of criminalization or other ways of taking away freedom of choice are paths to immorality. Because in the moment in which the decision of having a child or not no longer belongs to me but to the state (because they decided to do so), I won't treat this as a moral dilemma but a default answer which was forcibly imposed upon me, mostly by people who will never even get pregnant because they are men. To conclude, I think the best way to transform the decision of having an abortion into a completely immoral act is to ban abortions. This would be the first aspect. For me, anything that leads to immorality is a serious issue. Secondly, I think that if somebody decides that a child is to be born, then they must also raise it. If this person x, this woman x made this decision, then she must take responsibility for it. If the state made this decision, the state must raise it, if the church made this decision, the church must raise it, if the husband forced her to have this child then the husband must raise it. To sum up, it's not an everyday decision. It's not "Maricica killed her baby", as put in the *Taliban discourse*, but "Maricica simply couldn't take the responsibility of being a mother, with all the obligations deriving from that". The best case scenario would be, as a man, to say: "If I force her to have a baby at any cost then I, the one who forced her, must raise it and take care of it from now on." That's what it's all about. I think that in whatever society we find ourselves in, be it one that overcame such a trauma, like Romania did [during the communism abortions were forbidden and contraception was restricted, this led to over 10.000 women who died trying to have 'illegal' abortions], or one that didn't, the problem is the same: who takes responsibility? A woman or a girl, because in most cases we're talking about young women or even teenagers, can't take the responsibilities of motherhood because of various reasons so this is stupid. People might say that she should have used protection and so on and so forth. First of all, accidents happen. Second of all, we know that most of those who have abortions come from social categories which have little or no access to sex education and contraceptive methods. You're taking advantage of someone's ignorance or state of poverty to force them to have a baby but what happens to it afterwards?

How do you explain the fact that there are these backwards steps from the accomplishments of democracy and the overthrowing of the regime for Romania? Is twenty years after this historical trauma forgotten?

Firstly, I think most people don't know anything about this historical trauma. Younger generations don't really do about it. From my point of view, a piece of history which began before one was even born is a thing of the common, primitive history textbooks. For somebody who was born after the communist era, slavery, feudalism, and communism are the same. These are things that they learn about but which have nothing to do with their lives nowadays. Nothing! Maybe their parents have some memories of it. The probability of a parent, especially a mother or a grandmother, talk to their children about this trauma is pretty low because those who have lived it, and I don't know how many from my generation got away from the absence of this trauma, purposefully forget in order to get away from their own emotional burden or they try to avoid burdening their children and grandchildren with their stories. In school, nobody teaches them anything about daily life under the communist regime and what the consequences were. So how would they know? This trauma will be gone with my generation. The memory of it is neither in the history books nor in the social culture of the population. All that there is left is a pleading for rights because this trauma won't matter anymore. I could very well plead for this issue: whoever decides must also take responsibility. You cannot decide what I do with the rest of my life. There's another important factor: the fact that it becomes a general trend in the world, the fact that spreading this conservative populism which is currently dominant will make it mainstream and everybody believes that neoliberalism is mainstream. Alright, we make another thing, populism - closed, frozen, autarchic. Is this better? I don't think so. So the opposition for this would be the victory of a populist right wing party. We can't say it is yet extremist but it is a populist-right which hates everything that is feminism, civil rights, equal politics and everything involved. What do we expect? What can we expect in the future? It's a worldwide trend!

Considering that the situation of women's rights in Romania was heavily influenced by the policies of other countries, do you think that the international trend of populism could have a similar impact on the situation of women in Romania?

Yes, absolutely. But I also believe that great powers have come to accept a way of thinking which produced leaders like Trump and which revolts against the issue or equality and rights as also includes xenophobic and Islamophobic elements. The pro-Trump movement is an anti-feminist, against civil freedom and equal treatment, anti-foreigners, anti-Muslim, anti-Jewish, anti-everything movement. This is it's "menu" of this movement. If it got so popular as to give the president of America then we should be worried about it. If this movement becomes stronger by day in both Western and Eastern Europe - in this particular case, what happened in Poland - this means that we should be very worried about this movement. If we have a "Family Coalition", which hasn't put this [forbidding abortions] on its agenda yet and I don't think they will in the near future, we should be worried. This also means that it is likely that we, the others, haven't yet found the right ways to make ourselves understood. Thus, hostility against people like us is high because people don't understand us.

You developed the concept of “Room Service Feminism” and I was wondering what would be the parallel between “Room Service Feminism” during the transition period and “Room Service Populism” today?

I see here two scenarios. This whole thing with the populism could degenerate into extremism and all these hard feelings peak in the case. Let's go on with the scenario, let's say if China's economy would implode, the Chinese all get a passport and they spread across the world. This could be possible, why not? And on top of islamophobia we would have terrible xenophobic reactions and some kind of terrorism of being threatened that foreigners are coming and one would feel strangers in their own country etc. If things go this way, the probability of populism degenerating into extremism and extremism being just as contagious as Nazism was in the 20th century is high. If things don't go this way and, let's say, the states, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank will be wise enough to offer political support so that a balance between economies could exist and this polarization wouldn't be so harsh then, if you ask me, the current wave of aggressive conservativeness will result in a wave of feminism born within the younger generation and which comes after this post-feminist pretentiousness of “What else could you ask for? You already have it all!”. They will feel more solidarity with the generation of their grandmothers because the generation of their mothers didn't have much to worry about from this point of view and they thought like: “We're now in a post-feminist era, we don't need it anymore.” Well, we can see that we'll never been in such an era. It's very likely that this will revitalize the civil and political rights movements and to feminist movements.

But I think here one must proceed with a bit more wisdom when it comes to respecting the choice of others. If I choose to wear a veil to signify the fact that I am a woman and I should cover myself before God and I choose to be a religious woman and a housewife etc., you, a feminist, should respect my choice. Don't despise and disrespect me! In the same way, if I want to be independent, creative, autonomous or a globetrotter, respect my choice. Don't create coalitions which are against me. I think none of us has come to really respect the choice of others. Nowhere was achieved this. We're not able of not treating those, who are not like us, like they're retarded, like they're Taliban. And they can't or they don't know how to treat us like some people who simply picked a different way of life. As long as we don't make peace and we can't say “this is what you've chosen, I respect your choice”, how can I ask for the same thing from you? Contempt towards those who have not reached your stage of development, that is having rights seems to attract the hostility of others and this hostility, if in an unfavorable context, can become so aggressive as to cancel all the rights that were won.

Do you see the political transformations towards democracy as being continuous?

No, they were never continuous. First of all, social sciences cannot operate with these things and this is why we have different perspectives within them because the way in which society evolves depends on human nature more than we think. And this is happening constantly in time! There are times in history when the good parts of people are supported in order to prevail and to make people more cooperative and trusting and this is when we have democracy. And we have times when mistrust, suspiciousness and envy prevail and become institutionalized and this when we have far-right regimes or fundamentalist regimes. As humans, we are the same people as we were 4000 years ago or 2000 years ago or 1000 years ago. Social arrangements, social institutions support if one part of us or the other to prevail. These

totalitarian regimes bring the worst of us to the surface: hate, envy, hard feelings, revenge, the will to strangle the others because they are not like you. Democratic regimes surface cooperation and tolerance.

Did gender policies have any impact on the everyday life of women?

I think they did but in a silent manner. Right now we have a little bit over 20% women in the Romanian Parliament compared to 11% in the Parliament which is now going to leave office. It's quite a lot. I can relate this to the high pressure put, even inside the Parliament itself, for gender representation ratios even if the gender ratios weren't legislated. There was a pressure higher than ever before, and during an electoral year and this made a difference. Parties had enough political wisdom not to keep monopolizing available parliamentary seats with men. Moreover, there are now ethical, professional, and legal instruments with which women can defend themselves if they are being discriminated and the possibility of legitimate protest when gender inequality becomes serious.

How do you see the evolution of feminism during the period of transition?

Honestly, I was hoping it wouldn't be necessary anymore and I am still hoping. I might not live to see this and I don't know about the younger generations, but feminism will exist as long as there are causes which trigger it: misogyny, discrimination, and patriarchy. Until these are gone, there's no way for feminism to ever disappear. If it disappears or it becomes invisible that is because the regime is no longer democratic so as to be able to see from different perspectives. To conclude, it won't disappear unless the causes disappear too. Moreover, it is possible that the great deal of opposition and the counteroffensive of today's conservativeness will gain strength within the feminist manifestations.

Was the voice of feminism heard in the mainstream after '89?

Well how would we have all these policies, how would equality of chances be a constitutional principle, how would there be laws for this, how would there be laws to protect you against domestic violence and sexual harassment if this voice wouldn't have been heard? It's not like they were gift from someone, of course it was heard! It is clear than within the European Union we are dealing with many countries for which feminism is state policy and that's how it's supposed to be. That's the case of Romania as well. The problem is that we don't really rush to apply the laws we have or we only do under high pressure and a kind of pressure that must be internal.

And the power pressurizing for gender equality is perceived as rather external?

It's not external at all. If by "external" we understand the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council only for the time when Romania was not a member state and all this was part of the community acquis. After this, the pressure for this issue completely vanished so right now we can only use the argument of the internal pressure.