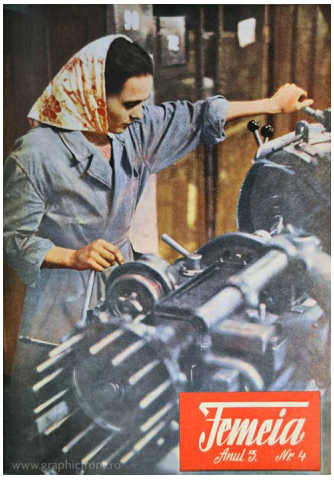

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The Stagnation of Women's Emancipation in post-Communist Romania

Beyond the Curtain: Evaluating Gender Equality in Communist and Post-Communist Romania

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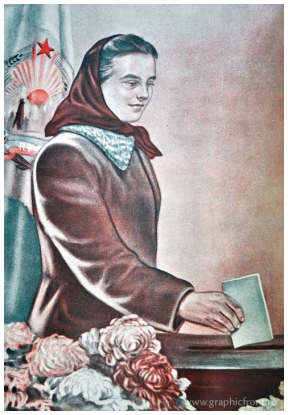

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[1] Images taken from different issues of the communist magazine named "Femeia" (i.e. "The Woman")

Abstract

This paper delves into the intricacies of gender equality in Romania, focusing on the impact of communist policies on the developments post-1989. The study begins by assessing the progressive nature of communist policies in the Eastern Bloc, which advanced women's rights in education, employment, and the political realm. These policies often surpassed the progress seen in Western countries, even contributing to the global feminist movement. While reluctant to use the term ‘feminism’ due to its negative connotation and memories of Western imperialism, some values were shared between Eastern ‘women-friendly’ policies and Western feminist policies. However, beneath this facade lay numerous hidden issues and contradictions.

The paper introduces various feminist theories to contextualize these policies and examines women's experiences during and after communism in Romania, providing extensive sources and statistics. Under communism, women saw advancements in education and employment but faced the double burden resulting from a first shift at work and a second shift of domestic duties. Post-communism, while significant progress was seen, this took the form of ‘snail steps’. Romania became the lowest ranked country in the European Union on the Gender Equality Index.

Adapting the concept of State Feminism, the study argues that the women-friendly policies of communist Romania can be seen as a form of feminism, despite their flaws. Lastly, several factors are considered as contributors to the stagnation of women’s emancipation.

Key words: communism; gender equality; post-communism; state feminism; feminism.

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List of abbreviations

- RCP Romanian Communist Party
- RNCW Romanian National Council of Women
- IWY International Women’s Year
- WIDF Women's International Democratic Federation
- WPAs Women’s Policy Agencies

Introduction

In the Aspasia Journal, Lukić examines how the Communist bloc countries exhibited more progressive views and policies compared to Western nations following World War II. To exemplify this, she states the following:

> *"[...] in the late 1970s [...] I had found a feminist volume on the post-World War II US strategy to push women out of their workplaces and send them back home again. The idea was very strange to me [...] No one in Belgrade was preventing me from studying what I wanted, or from getting a job; it was unimaginable to think that my salary would be lower because I was a woman; abortion was legal and free of charge. And I did not feel discriminated against when it came to my participation in the public sphere; no one had ever refused to publish my article because I was a woman."* (Haan et al., 2016, p.136).

As explained by Lukić, the experiences of countries within the Communist bloc cannot be generalised. This paper will focus specifically on Romania (Haan et al., 2016). The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 marked a profound turning point for communist countries in the Eastern Bloc, including Romania. The subsequent transition from a communist regime to a democracy resulted in dramatic changes across all realms. While Romania has made strides towards gender equality in the three post-communist decades, it remains significantly behind other EU countries. The 2023 Gender Equality Index places Romania last in the European Union, with a score of 56.1 out of 100 possible points (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024). Prominent scholars argue that there is a lack of genuine commitment to gender equality, labelling Romania a case of 'room-service feminism' to describe how it passively implements

gender equality measures dictated by the EU, akin to room service in a hotel, instead of developing them organically (Miroiu, 2007).

Given the seemingly progressive policies of Socialist Romania, one might expect democratic Romania to have advanced much faster. Consequently, this thesis explores a critical question that has often been overlooked in the discourse on Eastern European transitions: *Were the gender policies of Socialist Romania a form of feminism? If so, why was there a noticeable stagnation in the progress of women's emancipation after the 1989 Revolution?*

To address this question, it is essential to examine the theoretical framework surrounding the compatibility of communism and feminism. At its core, communism, particularly as practised in Eastern Europe, claimed to have solved the 'woman question', championing gender equality as part of its broader commitment to social equality. This progressive nature of the communist bloc led to policies that ostensibly advanced the status of women far beyond what was observed in many Western countries during the same period. However, beneath this facade, significant disadvantages and contradictions existed, cracking the 'mask' of genuine gender equality. Feminism encompasses a multitude of theories and perspectives, all advocating for the rights and equality of women. To be able to later determine whether the women-friendly policies of communism were truly a form of feminism, it is necessary to understand what constitutes feminism. Therefore, a sub-section of the theoretical framework will be dedicated to this, along with another sub-section that goes beyond Western feminism and explores the negative stigma surrounding this term in the Eastern bloc.

Before answering the research question, this paper will examine women's experiences during communism and post-communism to demonstrate the stall in women's emancipation. Various domains will be explored, focusing on education; the labour force; the political realm;

the protection of women through the legislative framework; the dominant public opinion on women's responsibilities, the control of women's bodies through the (lack of) reproductive rights; domestic violence; and the role of civil society.

After demonstrating the differences in women's experiences under the two regimes, the discussion will begin by arguing that the women-friendly policies of Socialist Romania can be considered feminist, specifically as a form of State Feminism. This argument will be supported by rebutting the reservations of other scholars. The shortcomings of State Feminism will then be explored, explaining how these contributed to the stagnation of women's emancipation post-communism. The final sub-section will delve into other reasons for this stagnation, focusing on the rhetoric versus the reality of communist policies, the non-linear nature of progress, and the impact of Romania's entry into the European Union.

Relevance

The relevance of this area of study is clear. Achieving gender equality is essential within itself as emphasised by the fifth goal of the Sustainable Developmental Goals: "gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world" (United Nations, 2023, para.1). Unfortunately, a recent study by the World Bank revealed that the "global gender gap is far bigger than previously thought" and that there is "no equality for working women in any country in the world" (Ahmed, 2024, para.1). It is crucial, thus, to understand what is causing progress to stall. Gender equality is also necessary for eradicating poverty and promoting the well-being, education, and health of both girls and boys (United Nations, 2023).

A further point of relevance arises from the importance of understanding the true history of Romania. One cannot know how best to achieve gender equality without exploring the country's past relations with it.

Donert (2017) also discusses how communist women's organisations are underresearched, which is another point of focus of this paper.

A crucial argument brought by this paper is a challenge to the narrative of feminism's history. It will be argued that scholars have underscored (or even effaced) the contribution of women from Eastern Europe to discourses of "equality, development, and peace" (Popa, 2009, p.60). Furthermore, Ghit explains that exploration of the connection between communism and feminism should not be viewed as a taboo that is automatically deemed illegitimate due to the repressive nature of communism (Haan et al., 2016). Instead, this type of research "can contribute to decolonizing gender and women's history and globalising themes in the historiography of Eastern Europe" (Ghit in Haan et al., 2016, p.165).

Lastly, State Feminism, a concept developed to explain the dynamics within Western liberal democracies, has rarely been applied as a lens to analyze communist states. Consequently, it has seldom been applied as a lens to explore communist states. In exploration, the only research paper found using this concept for Romania, was an article by a prominent scholar who rejected its applicability. This thesis will challenge that perspective.

Repressive Regime

Before exploring whether communist women-friendly policies were feminist, it is essential to acknowledge one fact: Romania was one of the most repressive communist regimes in the Eastern Bloc. Daily life for Romanians was dominated by fear of the repressive secret police, the Securitate. With an estimated 11,000 agents and half a million informers, this was one

of the Eastern Bloc's largest and most brutal forces (Smith, 2006). Additionally, by the 1980s Romania faced food shortages, the rationing of electricity, a lack of fuel, medicines and other basic requirements, which severely decreased living standards and increased unrest (Fischer, 1983). It is estimated that 15,000 Romanians died yearly due to starvation, the cold or other shortages (Thomas, 1989).

Theoretical framework

The compatibility of communism and feminism

Communism and feminism have a complex relationship leading to intense debates regarding their compatibility or contradictory nature. The main starting point for this took place in the Aspasia Journal in 2007, in a forum issue titled *Is "Communist Feminism" a Contradictio in Terminus?*. Within this, various scholars debated whether communism actually emancipated women, or whether communist feminism is an oxymoron.

Regarding the compatibility of communism and feminism, contributors like Natalia Novikova, Jane Slaughter, and Krassimira Daskalova argue that both theories must be contextualised in their historical and geographical settings. Within these circumstances, communism truly did provide unprecedented opportunities and rights for women. Early Bolsheviks promoted political equality between the genders and the participation of women in communist institutions. Their regime was a pioneer in creating a social state responsive to the needs of women, aiming to free them from the ‘slavery’ that is housework (Studer, 2015). They fought for the liberation of Russian women in their lives, but also in the law to “give Communist society a new member” (Stites, 1976, p.177). Communism required the creation of a new woman - free and independent. This independence was to be assured through the implemented policies

such as the right to work; the creation of collective institutions for children; and the liberalisation of abortions and divorce (Ghebrea, 2015). Equality between men and women was seen as central to socialist ideology and, employing a Marxist-Leninist perspective, it was believed that patriarchal oppression was a consequence of capitalist societies. Therefore, the belief was that this had to be overcome by abolishing private property and socialising reproductive and productive labour (Donert, 2017). Nevertheless, the implementation of such policies was lacking in certain countries and such progressiveness was later suppressed by Stalinism (Studer, 2015). This is an example of the non-linear nature of women's emancipation under communism (Haan et al., 2016).

There is also debate surrounding Alexandra Kollontai - a key Bolshevik theorist who created the Zhenotdel (i.e. the Women's Department of the Communist Party in Soviet Russia) in 1919. This organisation was formed to promote women's rights (e.g. labour rights; educational programs, social services) and to mobilise them to participate in the building of the new socialist society. Despite this, Kollontai refused to label herself as a feminist, arguing the following:

> *"[Women] were ignorant of the simplest principles of life, physical and otherwise, ignorant of their own functions as mothers and citizens." It was imperative, then, to raise the consciousness of these women and to deal with specifically woman-related problems—such as maternity care—in their own special way. This, she said, was not feminism."* (cited in Sites, 1976, p.179).

Kollontai's rejection of feminism, despite following feminist ideals, is a critical example of the issue of applying Western feminism to other countries without contextualising it. For communists, this term had a negative connotation. Sites (1976) explained that Kollontai was right: she was not a feminist in the way that Western women were feminists. In the West,

feminists' main aim between 1848 and 1920 was focused on women's suffrage. Following its acquisition, for a long time none of them tried to accomplish economic or sexual liberation. The timeline of this Western feminism in comparison to Bolshevik 'feminism' is reversed. While the former saw the political emancipation of women as the end, the latter saw it solely as a means - as a beginning.

In fact, many theorists and historians argue that Kollontai's actions actually were feminist. Studer (2015) views her as having followed their ideals since she advocated for women's sexual autonomy and criticised traditional family structures, as well as the gendered division of labour. Not only this, but she even criticised "the emotional norms within the couple, a relationship based on love that demands that women give up a part of their selfhood" (Studer, 2015, p.131). Kollontai was also critical of marriage, viewing it as a patriarchal institution which served to enslave women (Ghebrea, 2015). Others, such as Mihaela Miroiu, argue that Kollontai was fundamentally anti-feminist (Studer, 2015).

Despite the progressive policies found within communist countries that helped empower women, there were also significant limitations and contradictions to be found. Women were never fully liberated and this is the source of the debate regarding the ambivalent relationship between communism and feminism (Studer, 2015). The following three sections will elaborate on 'feminist' actions within communism. This upcoming discussion will elucidate the need to understand what feminism is. To identify the reasons behind the stagnation in the feminist movement in post-communist Romania, one must understand whether the progressive gender policies were feminist in the first place.

The progressive communist bloc

Kollontai was not an exception when it comes to her progressive views, she was one of many European communist women activists that shared similar views. In fact, historian Melania Ilic explains that by 1963, Soviet women had every reason to boast and be praised for their advanced achievements. Donna Harsch (2013, p.1) shares this view, remarking that "[f]rom the 1950s to the 1970s, many observers, and certainly communist leaders, believed that communism had successfully answered the 'woman question' ". Ghit adds that after seeing the success of state-socialist regimes in this area, Western feminists used to challenge their governments, asking for steps to decrease the existing gender disparity in their own countries (Haan et al., 2016).

Despite falling short of achieving gender equality, socialist states in the Eastern bloc made crucial strides by: promoting and advancing equal educational and employment opportunities; providing socialised childcare services and extended maternity leave; offering access to contraceptives and abortion; liberalising divorce; and ensuring women had equal rights to men under the law. These were often ahead of Western feminist demands and strongly influenced global feminist movements (Donert, 2017; Harsch, 2013). In fact, Donert (2017, p.399) adds that "many of the demands of Western feminist movements after 1968 were already taken for granted by women living in socialist states". Importantly, socialist states aimed to mobilise women as women and as workers, but also as a specific group with its own needs - particularly in their role as mothers. This led to both privileges and responsibilities.

An example of the progress made is seen in the German Communist Party, who campaigned in the 1920s and early 1930s for the legalisation of abortion. They used the slogan "Dein Körper gehört Dir", which translates to 'Your body belongs to you' (Studer, 2015).

Moreover, women could theoretically hold any position in communist political structures, providing an unprecedented opportunity for women in the political and public activism realm. This, however, fluctuated from country to country and women were usually not able to become full members of the communist party. The division of labour was also highly gendered and when women made up part of the Comintern or communist parties, they usually occupied administrative positions (e.g. secretaries; translators) (Studer, 2015).

Women had access to universal education, healthcare and even to state-subsidised vacations. In fact, by the early 1980s, women represented the majority of students in higher education in all communist countries (Harsch, 2013). Additionally, legislative reforms ensured equality in the public and family life as well as guaranteeing a workplace (Massino & Penn, 2009). Initially, cultural norms had resulted in anxious resistance to women's entry into the workforce, but soon after the additional income brought into the household was welcomed (Harsch, 2013). While the socialist state's support was strategic and self-serving in attempts to increase the rates of industrialisation, the workforce participation rate still outmatched those of Western countries (Massino & Penn, 2009).

Communist and postcolonial countries also pushed for women's and racial rights at the United Nations, which led to crucial developments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Furthermore, socialist influences helped shape other key international documents such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, in an aim to require nations to take affirmative action that would benefit women (Donert, 2017). Another move exemplifying the advocation of communist states at the international level can be seen from the following quote:

> *In October 1975, the Soviet bloc organized its own World Congress of Women as the socialist contribution to International Women's Year. Held in East Berlin, the World Congress conceptualized women's equality as the embodiment of the socialist conception of human rights, understood as fundamental elements of social justice and entitlements.* (Donert, 2017, p.410).

The cracking mask

In the 1980's, Harsch (2013) notes that the balance tipped in the negative direction, with Western feminists questioning the success of communism in answering the 'woman question' and their failure in achieving complete gender equality. This occurred due to several reasons, among which: 1) rapid economic decline; 2) political collapse and the slipping grasp of communist regimes; 3) Western countries had equaled (or even surpassed) the gains achieved under socialism, which diminished their earlier perceived greatness; 4) new contemporary Western perspectives tended to emphasise the private sphere as the source of women's oppression - an area mostly overlooked under communism; and 5) the release of previously unavailable archives (post-revolution) revealed that official data had overstated the extent of the equality between genders.

Despite the impressively high workforce participation rates, labour divisions were typically gendered, with women being heavily represented in sectors such as education, government administration, public health, catering and social welfare (Harsch, 2013). Massino and Penn (2009) add that women predominantly occupied low-skilled and consequently low-paid positions. Therefore, although equal pay for men and women was mandated, women generally earned less due to the nature of their jobs. These patterns precluded women from attaining economic equality with men (Harsch, 2013). The unbalanced division of work was also seen

within the household, with it rarely being addressed by public policy. The reluctance of the communist state to enter the private sphere was also seen through the unspoken taboo surrounding domestic violence (Donert, 2017).

Another criticism arises from efforts to introduce women into traditionally male-dominated positions (e.g. mining). These attempts were often unsuccessful because of societal resistance (Donert, 2017). Furthermore, women were significantly underrepresented in high-level political posts (Massino & Penn, 2009). This meant that they had a remarkably low share of political power (Harsch, 2013).

The goal of socialising family life by providing childcare represents another shortcoming in most communist countries due to its inadequate implementation. Combined with persisting patriarchal attitudes, this resulted in a 'double burden' for women (i.e. first shift in the workforce followed by the second shift at home). It is important to note that women in other parts of the world were faced with similar issues (Massino & Penn, 2009).

Another notable criticism is the suppression of non-communist women's organisations during communism. After the war, previously active groups were either shut down or absorbed into communist organisations (Funk, 2014).

As mentioned earlier, progress in women's emancipation under communism was not linear. Therefore, it is not surprising that after a burst of revolutionary initiatives, there was eventually a return towards more traditional gender roles and patriarchal attitudes (Haan et al., 2016).

Moreover, Studer (2015) explains that women's emancipation was never the goal of the communist political program, but rather it was initially seen as a byproduct of achieving socialism. Even this was mainly focused on working-class women, viewing women as class

members and not as representatives of their genders. Furthermore, the priority of women's emancipation diminished for the leadership as they gained power and became focused on maintaining and consolidating it.

Various researchers have claimed that although communist women's leagues in China, Eastern Europe and Cuba were initially fairly autonomous and focused on women's interests, Party leaders did not allow this for long. Harsch (2013, p.6) argues that these organisations were stripped of their main purpose and had to, instead, become cheerleaders for the Party and focus on "convincing housewives to join the workforce". Haan, however, rejects this line of argumentation, explaining that history is more complex than this (Haan et al., 2016).[2]

One U.S. philosopher became particularly controversial within this debate after publishing a paper in 2014 titled "*A very tangled knot: Official state socialist women's organizations, women's agency and feminism in Eastern European state socialism*". Nanette Funk criticised modern researchers for taking too positive of a stance regarding gender and state socialism in Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1989. She believes that it is erroneous to suggest that the women in these communist organisations had political agency or that their policies were of a feminist nature. Instead, she claims that these institutions were solely top-down 'transmission belts' for communist parties and any periods of agency and action were exceptions. Any women who did not align with the Party's communist ideals were excluded from leadership. While women exercised some agency within these constraints, their resistance was localised and passive (through acts of omission, not action). A key argument of hers is that while there may have been feminism in the countries pre-1945, assuming a linear history in the progress of women's rights will make women forget the non-democratic aspects of communist regimes. What she names "Revisionist Feminist Scholars" are described as searching to find 'active'

[2] This discussion will be elaborated upon later on.

women who were not just following Party orders; overstating their feminist nature due to biases; and overlooking crucial problems in their lines of argumentation. In trying to retrospectively label women's organisations as feminist, modern researchers are mistakenly simplifying complex and often contradictory actions that may have benefitted women, but they also instrumentalise them to the Party's goals (Funk, 2014).

Beyond Western Feminism

The 10th version of the Aspasia Journal is more or less a Forum dedicated to correcting Funk and rebutting her arguments. Within this, some of the researchers that Funk mentioned by name, such as Ghit, Popa, Bonfiglioli and Daskalova (among others), responded to the personal denunciation (Haan et al., 2016). Haan (2016) starts by directing the same criticism towards Funk regarding bias - she fails to acknowledge her partiality and assumes that her interpretation of these organisations' history is the correct one. Later in the forum, Magdalena Grawbowska refers to this as the problem of "the universalizing representation of liberal Western feminism—in which feminism is understood as unfettered resistance toward a universal patriarchy, driven by free will—as the sole point of reference for the marginal East European women's movement" (Haan et al., 2016, p.127).

Haan points out another error in viewing communism and feminism as mutually exclusive. She explains that Funk's line of reasoning fails to account for women such as Alexandra Kollontai. In other words, it fails to account for women who were not coerced, misled or used by the Party; rather they were dedicated to fighting for justice and for women's emancipation and simply believed that the communist Party was a good route. Therefore, Haan changes the approach, by explaining that one cannot disregard the struggles of women who are not white and middle-class as 'non-feminist' just because their actions or speech may look

different to Western attitudes. Even if some women "did not use the label *feminism* themselves[, their actions] from an analytical perspective can be understood as intersectional, 'left feminism' " (Haan et al, 2016, p.105). In a similar line of reasoning, Chiara Bonfiglioli explains that activism must be contextualised and narratives like that of Funk work to "reinforc[e] Western cultural imperialist attitudes toward postsocialist Europe, as well as post-Cold War hierarchies in knowledge production, which are contributing to silencing the relevance of feminist histories and genealogies in Eastern and Southeastern Europe" (Haan et al, 2016, p.149). By retrospectively judging what women's motives were, Funk imposed her assumptions on socialist women. Daskalova further reinforces this idea by agreeing that Funk's refusal to acknowledge the feminist actions of socialist women's organisations solely works to strengthen the belief that only white middle-class Western women can engage in feminist activism.

The earlier given example of Kollontai rejecting the term 'feminism' despite following feminist ideals is a clear example of the term's negative connotation in non-Western countries. A political scientist named Bonfiglioli offers another example - Slovenian politician Vida Tomšič, who also struggled with the same issue, viewing feminism as a 'bourgeois' phenomenon. Despite this, she strongly defended women's rights regarding autonomous decisions about contraception and childbirth and also argued in favour of enhancing women's living conditions through economic and social development (Haan et al., 2016). Interestingly, although viewing feminism as a bourgeois Western concept, socialist states incorporated pre-socialist feminist ideals, claiming that the state could better achieve their egalitarian goals than nongovernmental women's organisations (Donert, 2017).

In the same Forum, Ghodsee discusses the problematic nature of generalising the experience of communist women and mass organisations, instead of identifying how they

operated differently in each country. She also criticises Funk's narrow definition of proactive agency and explains how there are many organisational forms which work to represent women's interests - condemning the liberal feminist view that the only option is an autonomous and independent women's movement. Archives recently made accessible prove that there was a great variety of types of resistance and covert politicking in former Eastern bloc countries that far exceed what feminist scholars thought was possible in even the most authoritarian and repressive socialist regimes. Moreover, Ghodsee shares Haan's view that some women believe communism to be the best path towards women's liberation. Just because a woman may have been a member of the Communist Party and was dedicated to achieving its goals does not exclude the option of her fighting for emancipation. Many communist women shared the same ideals as their male counterparts, while simultaneously believing that their interests as women were inseparable from larger issues. At least some women believed that the interests of women aligned with those of the Party (Haan et al., 2016).

While it is true that the approach taken by communism toward legal equality was a top-down one, this does not take away from its radical transformation of society regarding: women's education and labour participation rates; and the revision of family law. Ghodsee refers to Maxine Molyneux when explaining how liberal feminists have misinterpreted her work as evidence of the communist Party instrumentalising women's organisations to their own needs. In reality, she argues that while inclusion in the labour force and legal equality do not completely eliminate the patriarchy and do not overcome the pronatalist communist attitude, we cannot impose Western standards of feminism in developing countries. Women's progress in the United Kingdom cannot be compared to that of women in communist countries due to varying cultural and political obstacles. Instead, they can be compared to fellow countries in the developing

world to avoid underestimating the real progress made by imposing Western assumptions and expectations. The mentioned progress matches with that in the aforementioned section and powerfully states that "Wherever revolutionary governments came to power, the Marxist-Leninist party granted women full legal equality, expanded literacy campaigns, promoted education and professional training, and encouraged full labour force participation" (Haan et al., 2016, p.118). Even if the Party may have seen these steps as necessary in achieving rapid economic growth and modernisation, it does not take away from women fulfilling their gender interests. Women's organisations do not need to be autonomous to benefit women.

Later in the Forum, Grabowska provides evidence of the unjust absence of socialist women from feminist historical narratives, showing how this gap blinds Western liberal feminists to the crucial structural changes made during the period of state socialism.[3] Ghodsee (2014) expands on this, discussing the influence exerted by the Polish Women's League over women's equality policy, despite being constrained by the Communist Party. The League was more than a propaganda tool, having opposed the Polish state by fighting to protect women's abortion rights and to introduce sex education into the school curriculum. This is not an isolated case, with Ghodsee (2014) providing evidence of how the Bulgarian National Women's Committee also successfully represented Bulgarian women's interests despite operating within the restrictive communist framework. The upcoming subsection on the Romanian National Council of Women will also help demonstrate the existence of agency.

A multitude of feminist theories

In attempting to examine the compatibility of feminism with communism, it is crucial to understand the diverse and broad spectrum of feminist thought. Only in this way can one

[3] This is elaborated laborated upon later on.

evaluate the extent to which the gender policies of communist Romania aligned with feminist ideals. The following section explores variants of feminist theories.

Liberal Feminism

The first generation of feminism - liberal feminism - embraces three main liberal values. Firstly, an emphasis is placed on individualism so that every person is seen in terms of their unique attributes instead of socially prescribed roles. Secondly, its commitment to autonomy ensures that everyone can pursue their own conception of the good life without state intervention. This refers to the protection of the private sphere and self-determination and has meant that liberal feminists have (generally) defended against legislative intrusion in the domains of reproductive rights, birth control, abortion, and sexuality. Lastly, liberal feminists uphold formal equality, positing that all humans share certain characteristics such as a capacity for moral reasoning and the desire for inclusion in the political and economic life of their society (West & Bowman, 2019). Fineman (2005) further explains how in this framework, women and men are understood to be similarly situated and thus their sameness with men is emphasised. Consequently, liberal feminists seek to eliminate sex-based legal distinctions that exclude women from public life and restrict them to private life. The existing law must be equally implemented for all, not requiring the alteration of contemporary standards, rules or structures. In short, according to liberal feminism, “the main impediment to women’s advancement is discrimination by the state and major employers” (West & Bowman, 2019, p.19).

Intersectional feminism

The aforementioned absence of substantive change within the law was heavily criticised by later feminists, arguing that it only benefits women that can assimilate and conform to what is

expected of middle-class privileged men. While liberal feminists work to include women, they do not question the terms of inclusion and feminist theories tend to prioritise white women's needs and interests (West & Bowman, 2019). This argument can be linked to Crenshaw (1989)'s work, who coined the term 'intersectionality'. Using three legal cases, she proves the tendency of (past) legal doctrine to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories. Single-axis analysis - which looks at only one type of discrimination at a time - limits the experiences of people who are discriminated against on multiple grounds to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of their groups. In other words, if someone's experience is not compatible with the broader groups, they remain unprotected. Crenshaw (1989) contends that if a woman of colour's experience does not align with the experiences either of white women or of black men, they are marginalised and overlooked. Therefore, any reforms must be focused on marginalised groups, taking the stance of "When they enter, we all enter." (Crenshaw, 1989, p.167). Intersectionality is therefore a theoretical framework that explores how intersecting social and political identities (e.g. gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality) work together to produce a unique mode of privilege or discrimination. This approach accounts for the multi-faceted experiences of different groups of people, embracing the pluralist nature of women's lives.

Difference feminism

Contrary to liberal approaches, difference feminism - as its name implies - focuses on the differences between the genders. They go beyond the belief that gender inequality is perpetuated through discriminatory treatment and focus on how seemingly neutral laws can create inequalities. Formal equality is seen as insufficient, offering protection only to the experiences also shared by white men. Instead, difference feminism advocates for substantive equality and

different treatments that account for the differences between people (Fineman, 2005). As West and Bowman (2019, p.10) explain, “Women's reproductive lives are undeniably different from men's: women experience both wanted and unwanted pregnancies, menstruation, lactation and childbirth, which impact their bodies and often their health, while men do not”. Viewing men and women as the same can marginalise women’s experiences and render issues relating to pregnancy, childbirth or even sexual harassment invisible. [4] Consequently, difference feminism generally sees laws as reflective of male bias and illegitimate. Some even assert that the law itself is male (Fineman, 2005). The law can contribute directly or indirectly to women’s subordination. An example of the former is the exclusion of women from ‘male’ careers, while the latter is exemplified by the lack of substantial assistance with child care or restrictions on abortion.

Radical feminism

This type of feminism is heavily influenced by Marxism, embracing its understanding of exploitation, alienation and subordination of labour and applying it to the sexual exploitation of women. It asserts that women’s sexuality is used against them to exploit or subjugate them. It is objectified and seen as a thing to own and it is alienated from these women through sexual assault, harassment, trafficking, but also marriage, prostitution and pornography. Women’s sexuality is taken from them through force, coercion or through promises of safety, money or affection. West and Bowman (2019) further argue that women are trained to accept such treatment during their upbringing through culture, traditions or education. They talk about the complicity of the law in this practice, in how it both directly (and overtly) and indirectly (and covertly) does so. Directly - the law may permit the chastisement or sexual assault of women by

[4] This is not to say that only women or girls experience sexual harrasment, but rather that it disproportionately affects them.

their husbands; it may ignore the purchase of sexual labour from women trying to not starve; it may refuse to convict rapists. Indirectly - the law may turn a blind eye to a certain degree of sexual harassment or sexualisation of women and girls under the guise of free speech. In contrast to liberal feminists, this approach maintains that the state cannot ignore the private sphere under arguments of autonomy and individualism; instead, it needs to protect women - especially if women's sexuality is critical to their subordination. Additionally, radical feminists would also disagree with their liberal counterparts regarding the perception of women and men as the same. Formal equality and gender neutrality will remove the ability of the state to address or even notice the "appropriation of female sexuality" (West & Bowman, 2019, p.13).

Crucially, radical feminism focuses on the root causes of women's oppression, which they identify as the patriarchy. This system of power oppresses women through its laws; rights; culture; etc. at different levels of operation. It shapes women's lives at the personal level, as well as the international one, making use of various institutions (e.g. family, education, the economy) to maintain male dominance. This control over women, their sexuality and their reproductive power is strong enough to even result in the internalisation of patriarchal assumptions by all genders (Amir et al., 2024). Consequently, radical feminists fight for "the end of patriarchy's gender system, not merely expanding women's choices within patriarchy" (Jensen, 2021, p.4). [5]

Socialist feminism

The approach of socialist feminists is a combination of radical feminism and Marxist analysis, focusing on the interdependent nature of capitalism and the patriarchy as the source of women's subordination. Followers criticise other theories for failing to explain the deeper

[5] As pointed out by Jensen (2021), the patriarchy can also be detrimental to men (especially those that diverge from the norm - a white, middle-class, cisgender, straight man). Additionally, not all men engage in women's oppression, but their behaviour often perpetuates patriarchal norms that all women are constrained by.

structures that maintain men's domination over women and, therefore, being unable to lead to lasting changes. Socialist feminism, on the other hand, recognises that both capitalism and the patriarchy depend on women's unequal status (Bowman, 2021).

Theorists emphasise the need to overthrow the entire system, arguing that the abolishment of capitalism and establishment of communism is a necessary condition, but an insufficient one. Communism can improve women's lives, but it cannot reach true equality for all women while patriarchal structures persist. An approach exclusively concentrating on economic factors overlooks other influences on women's lives. In this regard, Juliet Mitchel identifies four key areas in achieving the liberation of women which also include non-economic factors: 1) production; 2) reproduction; 3) sex; 4) the socialisation of children. Change is necessary in all spheres to ensure real improvement that does not just mask the degradation of another sphere. To exemplify this, women cannot simply be inserted into the workforce (i.e. production) without the reorganisation of duties in the domestic sphere (Bowman, 2021; Wong, 1991). Otherwise, women would be subjected to a 'double burden'. Bowman (2021, pp.93-94) further discusses how "[t]he only route to the liberation of women [... is the] communalization of housework by the provision of nurseries and social responsibility for children in general, communal eating facilities, laundries, and the like". Alongside this, children must be socialised to expect equal sharing of household duties between genders. In short, emancipation requires systemic change, including the reorganisation of family structures and gender norms as well as alterations in the domestic division of labour (including its socialisation).

Explaining the necessity for a socialist revolution, Bowman (2021) argues that "[a]n antagonism between men and women was built into capitalism's organization of work [...]", with white men receiving wages high enough to support their families, while women (and persons of

colour) received much lower wages - making them dependent on men. Wong (1991) makes the same claim, explaining how paying these lower wages led to immense profits and how capitalism also made use of sexism and racism to divide workers. Additionally, in this system, women are socialised to carry out certain wifely or motherly duties, including preparing their children to become disciplined, productive workers for the capitalist market. Capitalist systems lead to world imperialism, which makes use of "sexism, racism, colonialism, heterosexism, homophobia, and class oppression to keep us down" (Wong, 1991, p.292). Implementing reforms that overlook the negative effects of capitalism may help some women, but it would create 'gradations' among those less privileged. In other words, the burden of domestic work would fall onto women of colour at exploitative wages (Bowman, 2021).

Socialist feminism views the persistence of discrimination against women workers as predictable since it is central to the patriarchy but also capitalism. However, understanding this link is the first step in resolving it and this approach adopts a belief where none of us are free until everyone is free. While reforms under capitalism are helpful, they are like a band-aid for a much deeper issue (Wong, 1991).

Women in communist Romania

Education

During communism, education - alongside paid employment - played a crucial role in enhancing women's social status and eventually contributing to their financial independence. Prior to the rise of communism, there were pronounced gender disparities in literacy rates, however, the introduction of universal subsidised education for all children made impressive strides towards resolving these gaps. Numerous women entered the education system, with many

advancing to university. While inequalities in educational access persisted along urban-rural lines, gender-based disparities were eliminated (Petrescu, 2014). School attendance was compulsory under communism until the end of Grade 12 (Ghile, 2024).

The RCP viewed education as integral to creating a 'new man' and controlling the population. Consequently, the budget allocated to this domain spiked, and thousands of new educational institutions were established in both urban and rural areas. Literacy rates significantly increased compared to previous periods, reaching over 90 percent. The number of students across all levels of education saw a substantial rise, with high school enrollment - for example - growing from 81,988 students in 1937 to double that in 1960 and over 1.3 million students in 1989. This increase also saw a rise in the number of teaching staff, with a 150 percent increase between 1938 and 1960. Numerous merit-based scholarships were also awarded (Ernu et al., 2010; Mădălina et al., 2018).

Education in communism can be divided into three phases: 1) the 1948-1949 reform, which mimicked the educational system in the Soviet Union and placed the entire system under the control of the RCP; 2) the 1958 reform, which somewhat liberalised education; 3) the 1972 reform (following Ceaușescu's visit to China and North Korea), which reintroduced restrictions and increased the emphasis on communist ideology. The first phase also saw a "cleansing" of the educational staff, where a large number of educators and professors were either arrested or killed to ensure tight control and alignment with official communist ideology (Mădălina et al., 2018; Mitroi, 2023). These were replaced by less qualified, loyal staff (Mădălina et al., 2018).

Labour force

As explained in the theoretical framework, communist states dictated an equal pay for equal work policy. This was the case in Romania, too, as will be seen in the upcoming subsection

named “Relevant laws”. Here, the 1972 Labour Code will be discussed, showing the various articles implemented to ensure the equality of women with men in the workforce, as well as measures implemented to protect them (specifically mothers, or pregnant women).

A source of criticism in regards to this topic is provided by Ghebrea (2015), who condemns the inexistence of unemployment benefits. Nevertheless, contrary to her belief, this paper would argue that while these are crucial in our current society, their importance was smaller during the communist regime. Every single citizen was guaranteed a place to work by the state (see the Labour Code provided in an upcoming subsection) and the lack of a job was considered illegal since all had to contribute to the socialist economy. Decree No. 153 from 170 specifically addressed the issue of ‘parasitism’, referring to those unemployed. Article 1 declared “people who evade their civic duty to ensure their means of existence through work, tending to practice a parasitic way of life, can be sentenced to jail or receive a hefty fine” (Decret Nr. 153, 1970). Consequently, the concept of unemployment differed from that which we hold today. Indeed, the State refused to offer unemployment benefits, but this was due to the guaranteed existence of a working place for each (even if these were sometimes inefficient or useless).

Within Decree No. 153/1970, no measures were protecting those unable to work due to physical or mental conditions. However, other laws established social welfare measures for these groups of people. An example of this is Law No. 3/1977 which dictated that “to people unable to work and without means of existence, the state granted them material support in the framework of social assistance” (Lege Nr. 3, 1977, self-translation).

It is relevant to consider the effect of the issue of ‘parasitism’ on women, who were faced with a double-burden as a result of having to balance domestic duties with their waged job. In 1985, women represented 40 percent of the workforce and occupied 27 percent of management

roles (Băluţă, 2014). As will be seen in the Labour Code, as well as the upcoming section on "Public Opinion", women had access to pre-and post-natal maternity leave; as well as financial allowances to ease the burden.

To facilitate the participation of women in the labour force, all communist states worked towards socialising child care to ease the existence of the 'double burden'. Childcare services were expanded, including the provision of nurseries and kindergartens. Harsch (2013, p.12) explains that "[b]y 1989, spots were available [in kindergartens] for 80 per cent of East German toddlers in contrast to 16 per cent in Czechoslovakia and single-digit coverage in Hungary, Poland, and Romania". These statistics, however, misrepresent the situation in Romania regarding the utilisation of institutionalised childcare during Ceausescu's regime. Preschool services were widely used both in rural and urban areas with the enrolment rate for children between 3 and 6 years old reaching 63 percent in 1989 (Ghebrea, 2015). In principle, the built nurseries were available to everyone, with Băluţă (2014) stating that by 1989, as many as 47,239 children were enrolled in the 840 existing nurseries. Due to high state-funded subsidies, kindergartens and nurseries had accessible prices. Additionally, children often had the opportunity to remain at school after their classes - under supervision - to enjoy a meal while their parents were still at work (Ghebrea, 2015). That being said, this means that once the work day was over, women still had to 'clock in' for their second shift - taking care of their children. This was described by the Party as the 'superwoman', who was a loving mother and an experienced worker (see upcoming section on "Public Opinion").

Other factors worked against the facilitation of women's work in the public sphere. First of all, care services for the elderly and the disabled were lacking and limited to low-quality residential facilities. As a result, these individuals were typically cared for within their

households (Ghebrea, 2015). Since norms dictated women to be the caretakers of the houses, this had the effect of adding to their 'double-burden'. Second of all, Ghebrea (2015) explains that domestic duties required more time and effort than in Western countries due to a lack of modern and efficient equipment.

Miroiu describes an average day for women as follows:

> *"The depiction of an ordinary winter day in the life of a wife in the communism of the '80s went like this: wake up at six in the morning, queue for milk, prepare children for school, leave for work on the bus stairs[6], freeze in the cold winter, queue between 16-18, return, feed the family, clean, heat the beds with hot water bottles, put the children to bed, take a shower with water from the pot, heated by kettle"* (Radu, 2011, para.9, self-translation).

The above quote reflects the struggles women faced due to the 'double burden' placed on them. The freezing temperatures and extremely long queues were commonplace in this period due to severe shortages. The day was too short to complete all of these duties and the term 'superwoman' was seen as more of an insult than a joke (Radu, 2011). In short, the public opinion of women was meticulously controlled by the Communist Party to promote their interests and goals.

It became clear that measures adopted by the communist regime to alleviate the endless work placed on women were insufficient. According to Petrescu (2014), the laws supporting pregnancy and childbirth were incomparably behind those of non-communist countries. Additionally, she explains that the provided childcare facilities were insufficient.

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[6] Due to very crowded public transportation, it was common to travel with the doors opened and dangling from the handrails.

Politics

In July 1946, Romanian women achieved a significant milestone as they obtained the right to vote. The law declared the vote to be “universal, equal, direct and secret, and can be exercised by all citizens who have reached the age of 21” (Șerban, 2014, para.34). Women had been able to vote since 1929, but only under certain conditions (Ilin-Grozoiu, 2023).

During the 1980s, women accounted for a third of the parliamentary seats and this number continued to rise until 1985 when it reached 35%. This ratio persisted until the 1989 Revolution. Women representatives could also be found in the Grand National Assembly (17 percent) and in the Communist Party (23 percent). Nevertheless, this figure must be taken with a grain of salt due to its lack of qualitative data to accompany it. Thus, it is possible that it was less an indication of genuine influence and more a superficial value. The reason for this claim is a pattern, referred to by Gârboni (2014), where the proportion of women in a political or administrative body was inversely related to its power. Women’s participation was largely symbolic, with most decision-making power being reserved for men holding higher positions within the ruling party. Of course, as explained earlier, there were exceptions akin to Ana Pauker’s example.

Harsch (2013, p.5), among other researchers, has argued that although communism enabled women to be elected into national legislative bodies, “neither individual women nor women as a group attained direct political power in any communist state”. She argues that any women who managed to obtain the position of minister were outliers - even then only being part of more marginal ministries such as that of education or culture. The Romanian experience differed from this. This can be exemplified by Ana Pauker- the ‘Iron Lady’ of Romania, who was a prominent female communist leader in the Romanian Communist Party and a member of

the Central Committee. She held significant power and influence, serving as the first-ever female to hold the foreign minister position globally. Pauker was later purged from her government role in 1952 amid accusations of 'right-wing deviationism', masking a power struggle between her and Gheorgiu-Dej, the first communist leader of Romania (Levy, 1995). This evidences the ability of women in communist Romania to attain substantial political authority (provided that they do not oppose communist ideology. Therefore, not only did most communist states far outmatch Western states when it comes to women's political participation (Harsch, 2013), but Romania was exceptional even among its comrade states.

The aforementioned double-burden placed on women, expecting them to be 'superwomen' had the role of decreasing the opportunities for women to participate in politics. This is one reason why the gender division never reached an equal split.

In 1979, the Secretary General of the PCR mandated that 30% of Party Congress members be women and advised a similar quota for the Central Committee (CC). This directive was effective, increasing the number of women in the Great National Assembly from 15.18 percent in 1975 to 32.79 percent in 1980. In the CC, women's representation was lower, sitting at approximately 20 percent before decreasing again in 1984 (Băluța & Rothstein, 2015). This lower quantity does seem to be evidence of Gârboni (2014)'s claim regarding an inverse proportion between the number of women and the power of an institution. It is also important to note that Ceaușescu's rule was a personalist one and it is estimated that 40 members of the Ceaușescu clan held top positions in the party and state hierarchy, including his wife and sister (Băluța & Rothstein, 2015; Washington Post, 1989).

Relevant laws

Two crucial sources for the protection of women's rights were: the 1965 Constitutions and the 1972 Labour Code. There are clear examples of laws aiming at equality before the law; equal employment opportunities; non-discrimination based on sex; maternity leave and benefits; equal pay; and support for working mothers. Some notable articles can be found below

1972 Labour Code

This section will highlight crucial parts of articles protecting women's rights.

Art. 2: "All citizens of the Socialist Republic of Romania, without any limitation or distinction of sex, nationality, race or religion, are guaranteed the right to work, having the opportunity to carry out an activity in the economic, technical-scientific, social or cultural field, according to their skills, their professional training and aspirations, depending on the needs of the whole society." (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation, emphasis added)

Art.14: "The woman is provided with wide possibilities of affirmation in conditions of full social equality with the man, benefiting, for equal work with him, of equal remuneration, of special protection measures. A woman is guaranteed the right to occupy any position or job, in relation to her training, in order to contribute to the development of material production and spiritual creation, while ensuring the necessary conditions for raising and educating children" (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation, emphasis added).

This article ensures that women are equal before the law concerning the working force. It is crucial to note, however, that there is an absence of sanctions in case of the failure to respect this. As previously explained in the theoretical section, women tended to earn less money than men due to the gendering of the labour force. Gherbea (2015) sees this as a consequence of how work was evaluated by the Communist Party: 1) quantity; 2) complexity; 3) social significance. However, the latter was often decided arbitrarily, with the fields predominantly occupied by men holding higher social significance. Women were working in 'non-productive' fields - such as education, culture, and health -, which were seen as less significant than heavy industry fields.

Art. 19: "The person employed in a socialist unit has the following main rights:

[...]

h) to benefit from appropriate working conditions, labour protection, free medical assistance, social insurance allowances in case of temporary loss of working capacity, measures to prevent illness, restore and strengthen health, as well as measures to protect social welfare of women and young people; for this purpose, important funds are allocated for the elimination of the causes that cause work accidents and occupational diseases, for the protection of work and the relief of physical effort" (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation, emphasis added).

Articles 64(1); 65; 67(1); 70(1); 81(2); 82(2); 120; 124; 125; 126; 127 further establish measures for the protection of all workers, including women, from unsafe working conditions; exploitation; unfair salary changes; arbitrary dismissal; unfair compensation; unregulated working hours or lack of rest periods.

Art 146: “The contract of the employed person cannot be terminated at the initiative of the unit during the temporary incapacity for work in which one receives social insurance benefits, in case of pregnancy, during maternity leave and during the breastfeeding period, during the period of caring for a sick child, up until the age of 3 years, as well as during the time in which the husband fulfils their military service, apart from the cases provided for in art. 130 para. 1 lit. c, d, g, j, k, l” (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation, emphasis added).

This article ensures comprehensive job protection for mothers that must take time off for pregnancy, maternity leave, breastfeeding, or caring for a sick child.

Working conditions for women

Art.151: “(1) In the Socialist Republic of Romania, the work of women is highly valued, ensuring her the right to occupy any position or job, in relation to her training and capacity, while at the same time creating the conditions for the multilateral development of her personality. In remunerating the work they perform, the principle "equal pay for equal work with men" is applied.

(2) Working women enjoy special measures, health protection and the necessary conditions for the care and education of children” (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation, emphasis added).

Here, paragraph 1 emphasises the high regard held by Socialist Romania regarding women’s labour. It ensures that women can occupy any position according to their abilities and qualifications and be fairly compensated for their work. As mentioned in the “Labour force”

section, the gendered division of labour still led to lower pay for women. Additionally, paragraph 2 refers to special measures enjoyed by women to protect their health, and also their children.

Art 152: "(1) Pregnant women and those who are breastfeeding will not be able to be used in workplaces with harmful, difficult or dangerous conditions, or medically contraindicated and they will not be able to be called to overtime.

(2) Pregnant women and those who are breastfeeding, who find themselves in the situations provided in the previous paragraph, will be transferred to other jobs, without thereby reducing their salary" (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation, emphasis added).

Article 152 demands safe working conditions for pregnant and breastfeeding women, ensuring that their work does not put their health in danger.

Art 153: "Women's work during the night, in industrial units, is allowed only in the following cases:

a) for women who hold management positions or positions of a technical nature that involve special responsibility;

b) for women who work in health and social assistance services;

c) in cases of force majeure, if there is an interruption in the operation of devices and installations, when their failure causes the cessation of work, as well as in the case when the work is necessary to save from an inevitable loss of raw materials, materials or products;

d) in other special situations, in some branches of production established by decision of the Council of Ministers with the agreement of the General Union of Trade Unions." (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation)

Art. 154: "Pregnant women, starting from the sixth month, and those who are breastfeeding will not be assigned to night work."

These two articles limit the circumstances under which women are allowed to work night shifts. Such measures can help reduce the existence of a double-burden.

Art. 155: "(1) Women have the right to paid maternity leave, which consists of a prenatal leave of 52 days and a postnatal leave of 60 days.

(2) If the birth occurs before the prenatal leave expires, the postnatal leave is extended by the number of days of unpaid prenatal leave" (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation).

Art 156: "(1) Units are obliged to give women half-hour breaks for feeding and child care during the working hours, at intervals of no more than 3 hours. To these breaks is added the time required to travel back and forth to the place where the child is. The time allowed for breastfeeding, including travel, cannot exceed 2 hours daily. Breaks are granted until the child reaches the age of 9 months, and can be extended up to 12 months in the case of premature, dystrophic children and those who require special care measures, based on medical recommendations.

(2) At the request of the mother, the breaks for feeding and caring for the child will be replaced by reducing the normal work schedule by 2 hours daily.

(3) Breaks and reduced working hours granted for the purpose of feeding and caring for the child are included in working time and have no consequences on remuneration or other material rights" (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation, emphasis added).

Art. 157: "Women who have sick children under the age of 3 will be granted, with the doctor's approval, paid leave for their care, which is not included in the vacation leave" (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation, emphasis added).

Art. 158: "Women who have children up to 6 years of age, whom they take care of, can work 1/2 the norm if they do not benefit from nurseries or dormitories; the time they were placed under these conditions was considered, when calculating seniority, as time worked with the full rate" (Codul Muncii al Republicii Socialiste România, 1972, self-translation).

These four articles create special measures that recognise the special needs of pregnant women or breastfeeding mothers. Moreover, women with young children have access to special workplace protections. The existence of Article 158 is further evidence of the State attempting to minimise the double-burden placed on women due to their work and familial responsibilities.

Articles 165(2), 167, 172, 173(1) and **178** help establish women's rights and the emancipation of women by ensuring better working conditions and the ability to contest unfair disciplinary measures; by promoting justice in the workplace; and by placing the burden of proof on employers.

1965 Constitution

The 1965 Constitution included several articles protecting women, establishing their equality before the law, as well as making references to special measures for mothers, such as paid maternal leave. The law also ensures women's presence in formal roles in the government (Article 80). Below are examples.

Art. 17: "Citizens of the Socialist Republic of Romania, regardless of nationality, race, sex or religion, are equal in rights in all areas of economic, political, legal, social and cultural life.

The state guarantees the equal rights of citizens. No limitation of these rights and no distinction in their exercise based on nationality, race, sex or religion are allowed.

Any demonstration aimed at establishing such fences, nationalist-savage propaganda, inciting racial or national hatred, are punishable by law."

Art. 18: "[...] The law establishes measures for the protection and security of work, as well as special measures to protect the work of women and the youth."

Art. 20: "[...] Paid maternity leave is guaranteed."

Art. 23: "In the Socialist Republic of Romania, women have equal rights with men.

The state protects marriage and the family and defends the interests of the mother and the child."

Art. 80: "[...] The Council of Ministers also includes [...] the president of the National Council of Women [...].[7]

The Council of Ministers can set up an Executive Office for the operative solution of current problems and the monitoring of the execution of the decisions of the Council of Ministers."

(Constituția Republicii Socialiste România Din 1965, 1986, self-translation)

Despite the aforementioned progressive articles, moving beyond the realm of the workplace, Petrescu (2014) argues that the communist regime did not sufficiently support women's complete emancipation through legislation and services. Women were triple-burdened due to their roles as mothers, professionals, and wives. The author writes that "laws for supporting pregnancy and childbirth or for protecting women from domestic violence were far behind the standards in non-communist states" (Petrescu, 2014, p.85). Ghebrea (2015) mirrors this belief, explaining that following the 1966 abortion ban, there were not enough protective measures for mothers and children in the face of rising maternal mortality, poverty, and unwanted children. That being said, she mentions that healthcare - despite its low quality - was universal, free, and prioritised pregnant women.

Public Opinion

In Communist Romania, the public opinion of women was heavily influenced and controlled. Through propaganda and censorship, the regime endeavoured to:

[7] Here, the female version of "President" is used, denoting the election of a woman.

> *"impose new models of womanhood within an ideally gender-neutral society. They rejected the 'bourgeois' model of the home-centred, male-dependent, passive feminine subject. They promoted the image of an assertive and determined female comrade and activist, occupying the same jobs and positions as men and participating in the same measure in the building of the communist society*" (Oprea, 2015, p.285).

While equality between the genders was highly emphasised, this was understood as the treatment of women as men to be achieved through waged labour. While the 'new woman' was degendered in the public sphere - entering the workforce -, in the private sphere she was strongly sexualised and controlled by the state (Șerban 2014). Propaganda was used initially to incentivise women to join male-dominated fields, but in the late 1950s, this practice faded. Instead, it highlighted women's maternal role and their domestic and familial duties (Harsch, 2013).

A mother's primary duty was to educate her children in the spirit of the Communist Party, with those taking their responsibilities seriously receiving medals as heroes (Șerban 2014). The magazine *Femeia*, the only one written by women and for women, was an essential tool in promoting the party's vision of the ideal woman. Editorial content was carefully curated to highlight women who embodied the 'new woman', focusing on their roles within the domestic sphere as well as their contribution to the workforce (Sofronie, 2015). In 1949, an issue of *Femeia* highlighted the financial allowances to be received by mothers - including a milk allowance for 9 months equal to half one's salary. Women were also informed of the childcare facilities available to them, so they could enthusiastically return to work post-maternity leave (Șerban, 2015).

This dual expectation of women as workers, mothers, and wives was meant to embody the superwoman - ideal woman -, but often resulted in unrealistic and burdensome standards for

women. They were expected to balance their professional responsibilities with their domestic duties (as well as the political realm for some). Despite the Party expecting all women to be 'superwomen', propaganda never combined these two aspects visually - the productive woman and reproductive woman were kept separate, showing women concurrently as mothers *or* as workers (Radu, 2011).

Communist propaganda also featured important women figures, notably Elena Ceaușescu (the dictator's wife) to reinforce the regime's narratives. In fact, International Women's Day in Romania eventually became a celebration of Elena instead, which demonstrates how the Communist Party politicised female representation to facilitate its goals (Radu, 2011)

Following the enactment of Decree 770 in 1966 that effectively banned abortion, the portrayal of the woman saw a significant change to complement the regime's pro-natalist policies.[8] Oprea (2015) divides this era into two distinct periods.[9] The first (1966-1971/1972), depicted women's primary roles as mothers and as educators of children who must be taught to love the Party. Motherhood became a matter of the state, with promises of assistance to ease the burden of domestic chores. These, however, proved ineffective or nonexistent. During this period, motherhood was still seen as only one aspect of being a woman, with the magazine highlighting women's lives beyond reproductive duties. The woman was not a birthing machine yet. Despite *Femeia* continuing to call for women's emancipation and equality with men, traditional values - such as femininity, intimacy, and women supporting men - were also reinforced.

[8] Information on Decree 770 is provided in the next sub-section.
[9] Oprea (2015, p.285) divides the work of *Femeia* into five phases: "(a) 1946–1960: hard communist propaganda; (b) 1960–1965: softer communist propaganda;11 (c) 1966–1971/1972: cosmopolitism; (d) 1973–1978/1979: softer communist propaganda; (e) 1980–1989: hard communist prop aganda."

The second period (1973-1978/79), was depicted as one of ‘Maternal Glory’ and the ‘Steel Woman’. Women were portrayed as masculine, carrying out the same manly jobs as the opposite sex. Additionally, this period was marked by aggressive anti-abortion propaganda (Oprea, 2015). *Femeia* began including stories on the dangers of abortion and birth control; the regrets faced by women who have had abortions; as well as the court trials of those who illegally aborted their babies (Massino, 2004; Oprea, 2015). The Party was painted as a protective institution that ensured ideal conditions to help mothers through daycare, financial incentives, and good education (Oprea, 2015). In 1973, Ceaușescu stated that: "The greatest honor for women is to give birth, give life and raise children. There can be nothing more precious to a woman than to be a mother." (Radu, 2011, para.2, self-translation).

The 1980s saw a strengthening of pronatalist policies and propaganda, with the socialist woman depicted as a mother first, and an extremely skilled worker second (Sofronie, 2015; Universitatea Petre Andrei, 2014). Radu (2011) explains that there was a major contradiction between the ideal woman promoted by the party, - who could happily carry out all of her duties in her roles as mother, wife, worker, and even sometimes politician -, and the reality, where women had overwhelming amounts of duties to fulfil, with the day being too short for them all. She calls the “3x8 plus infinity” (developed by Ecaterina Oproiu) emblematic of this lifestyle. This seems to refer to 8 hours of work; 8 hours of domestic duties; 8 hours of sleep in addition to the infinite other responsibilities placed on women.

Reproductive rights

In 1948, abortions were punishable by incarceration, however, this practice was fully legalised in 1957. The reason for this was the destruction of any institutions, norms and values

that preceded the communist system, including traditional family structures. Abortions became easily accessible, with 1 in 5 women receiving one (Oprea, 2015).

In 1966, in the face of plummeting birth rates, Ceaușescu dictated that this would be resolved through the prohibition of abortion through Decree 770 - the strictest abortion regime in the world. Abortions were a crime against women's health and the growth of the nation, and thus they were only warranted when:

> (a) the pregnant woman's life was in danger because of the pregnancy; (b) one of the parents suffered from a hereditary transmitted illness; (c) the pregnant woman was severely physically or mentally disabled; (d) the pregnant woman was more than forty-five years old; (e) the pregnant woman had already given birth to four children, whom she was also raising at the time of the pregnancy; or (f) the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest. (Popa in Haan et al., 2016, p.156)

Alongside aggressive pronatalist policies and propaganda, childbirth transformed from an intimate experience to a mechanical matter of the state. While the number of births (temporarily) increased, so did maternal deaths. To ensure that women were not illegally receiving abortions, the regime instituted forced gynaecological controls every three months. Additionally, contraceptives were no longer available (Universitatea Petre Andrei, 2014; Oprea, 2015).

Ceaușescu's regime failed to stimulate birthrates through social measures, choosing coercive and aggressive methods instead (Ghebrea, 2015). This period was characterised by misery and fear of being fined, imprisoned or dying as a result of unsafe abortions (Massino, 2004). The psychological consequences were severe, with women fearing accidental pregnancies and their loss of control over their bodies (Ghebrea, 2015). In the 23 years in which abortion was

prohibited, approximately 10,000 women lost their lives to unsafe abortions (Centrul Filia, 2020).

The abolition of abortions was not accompanied by sufficient social measures to aid the population, which worsened poverty and overwhelmed the daycares and schools. Numerous unwanted children were sent to orphanages (Oprea, 2015).

Domestic violence

Despite the promoted socialist rhetoric surrounding gender equality, domestic violence was largely allowed for and even occasionally justified. Thus, happening behind closed doors, it was used as a tool for power and control. Violence was often justified, seen as a response to challenges to men's authority and a natural consequence of women's inappropriate behaviour. That being said, abused women, were not passive victims, but instead could occasionally seek protection or redress within the legal system, which highlights their agency in the navigation of persisting patriarchal structures. Nonetheless, the issue was largely ignored by law enforcement with the exception of extreme violence or femicide. Additionally, domestic violence was omitted from criminal statistics, reflecting the regime's reluctance to officially acknowledge failures in constructing a law-abiding socialist society (Marcus, 2009). Laws insufficiently protected women from domestic violence (Petrescu, 2014).

Civil society

Unfortunately, the rise of communism led to the fall of civil society, leading to it becoming 'quasi-nonexistent'. The Communist Party had control over all existing unions, rendering their existence a symbolic one. Moreover, human rights organisations were banned and thus forced to work underground. Women's organisations were not spared in this process, having

been dissolved or transformed into propaganda machines (Ghebrea, 2015). The goal was to centralise and be able to control social movements and any civil society groups that could mobilise to challenge the state's authority.

Given this context, the progressive policies found in the 1972 Labour Code were inconsistently and scarcely applied. The state-controlled unions were unable to effectively defend worker's rights, including those of women. Consequently, legal provisions did little to protect individuals from human rights violations.

Romanian National Council of Women (Consiliul Național al Femeilor)

The section on the 'theoretical framework' touched upon the work of Nannette Funk (2014), who discussed how women's agency in official women's organisations were not the rule, but rather the exception. Instead, women usually employed a form of passive agency (or resistance) to the Communist Party's proposals. She then offers Romania as an example, describing how female members and local leaders refused to carry out the required political education of housewives and peasants. She labels these to be 'acts of omission'. Contrarily - and as previously explained -, Bongfiglioli criticises this approach for retrospectively attaching a subjective motive to socialist women and creating a gap between the activities of communist women and of liberal women. A second criticism was provided by Ghodsee when she discussed how this typology creates a rigid binary between proactive and passive activism, ignoring the merits of women working within the constraints of the communist system - or even working together with the system, believing that this is the ideal route.

There is a third criticism to take note of. A significant difficulty arises when attempting to analyse the history of communist women's organisations, which stems from the limited

availability of archival records from the state-socialist period, coupled with a hesitance of former members and activists to participate in interviews. Considering this scarcity of primary resources to research, one cannot so easily disregard an organisation, claiming it to be an instrument of the state. In line with this argument, Popa claims that "[t]he fact that judgement precedes evidence in the case of communist women's organizations [...] is a measure of their historiographical stigmatization" (Haan et al., 2016, p.152). There is not enough knowledge or information regarding the organisations' motivations and relations to the Communist Party to make strong claims about its agency.

In the context of the agency of women's organisations, Funk (2014) mentioned a period of active agency in the Romanian National Council of Women (RNCW) between 1945 and 1948 - an exception from the passive acts of omission - where they demanded kindergartens and maternity houses in workplaces. However, she overlooked another clear example of agency later in the Communist regime. Raluca Maria Popa provides a crucial account of the RNCW regarding the abortion ban of 1966, titling her article "We Opposed It". The RNCW was the longest-standing women's organisation during communism (from 1958 to 1989) and the successor of two other organisations: the Union of Antifascist Women of Romania - established by Ana Pauker in 1945 -, and the Union of Democrat Women of Romania (1948). In a 2013 interview with a former secretary of the RNCW, Maria Manolescu, stated the following:

> *We, the National Council of Women, opposed the decree to ban abortion. We wrote a study. It was a serious study that took us a year or so to develop. I was responsible for elaborating that study, but we had contributions from the [Bureau for] Statistics, from doctors, people who actually had the information. We were advocating for creating the*

conditions for having more children. We suggested, for example, longer parental leave, for two years. This study generated a huge scandal. (as cited in Haan et al., 2016, p.154).

The referenced study was initiated by the Ministry of Health, with the RNCW being part of a larger committee of experts, in an attempt to find the optimal solution for increasing fertility rates. The results were shared with the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party in July 1966 in the form of a written study. This included thirty pages of recommendations, summarised by Popa as eleven measures:

1. "to introduce birth allowances;
2. to increase the number of available places in nurseries and to improve the quality of the nurseries;
3. to extend the maternity leave for working mothers;
4. to extend regular leave for working mothers and to create some advantages for them when scheduling working hours and deciding on shifts;
5. to introduce different retirement specifications for working mothers;
6. to offer health-care benefits for unemployed parents who are raising two or more children;
7. to raise the age limit for child allowances;
8. to improve cultural and educational activities;
9. to increase the production of contraceptives;
10. to coordinate the study of the demographic problems; and finally
11. to improve legislation in order to increase birthrates." (Haan et al., 2016, p.155)

This information originating from Popa's interview with Manolescu shows that despite the lack of data, the RNCW seems to have been opposed to restrictive legislation, leaning instead

towards positive reinforcement to increase falling birth rates. This is clear evidence that the Council's interests aligned with those of women and they were not solely a mechanism of propaganda. That being said, due to the repressive nature of the regime, the RNCW had to work within the framework of the communist party. Considering this case of extreme opposition, communist leadership - including Ceausescu - were utterly dissatisfied with the findings of the report on birth rates due to their failure to recommend the restriction of abortion. Instead, the dictator chose to reject the Council's suggestions and ban abortions, which shows the limited influence of the Council over public policy. Most likely as a consequence of the Council's dissidence regarding this decree, there were severe ramifications - support and resources were reduced; local structures were disbanded (thus reducing the Council's size); and the political stance of the Council suffered (Haan et al., 2016).

Further demonstrating the existence of agency in the RNCW, Raluca Maria Popa (2009) engaged with the history of Romania and Hungary, discussing the accomplishments of their state socialist mass women's organisations. The respective two national councils of women formulated the discourse of equality, development and peace that was later adopted in 1972 at the international level with the UN General Assembly's endorsement of the International Women's Year (IWY)[10] - a year dedicated to the above-mentioned values. The proposal had been produced through the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), of which both the RNCW and the Hungarian National Council of Women were part[11]. This Federation was an international women's rights organisation that was "the largest and probably most influential international

[10] The General Assembly had initially resisted this proposal, but in 1972 it endorsed the International Women's Year, which was to be organised in 1975.
[11] The WIDF used its consultative status within the Economic and Social Council of the UN to ask for the creation of the IWF to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Commission on the Status of Women. The input of the Romanian representatives had been key in setting this agenda.

women's organization of the post-1945 era" (Haan, 2012, p.1). On the UN website, the following quote is found:

> "In 1972, to mark its 25th Anniversary, the Commission on the Status of Women recommended that 1975 be designated International Women's Year—an idea introduced by Romania on behalf of the Women's International Democratic Federation." (as cited in Popa, 2009).

Texts engaging with this type of discourse could be found in: the journal *Women of the Whole World* (published by the WIDF); reports by the RNCW at the UN Conference on Women in Mexico (1975) and at the World Congress of Women in Berlin (1975); and texts published at the national level. The latter could be found in *Femeia*[12], which was a magazine published by the RNCW between 1959 and 1989 and endorsed by the communist party (Popa, 2009).

The IWY acted as a catalyst and set in motion "the most significant event in global organizing on women's issues: the United Nation's Decade of Women (1976-1985)". (Berkovitch, 1999; Popa, 2009). A full endorsement of the IWY's themes (equality, development, peace) by the RNCW was evident in the preparation of this event, which demonstrates that these objectives were not foreign concepts imposed onto the RNCW, but they were intrinsic to their goals. It is true that communist parties were opposed to feminism due to its connotation as a bourgeois concept and put pressure on advocates to not use this term, but this didn't preclude socialist actors from fighting towards similar goals. Instead, they fought in the name of 'women's emancipation', or referred to the 'woman question', or the 'women's conditions' (Popa, 2009). Referring back to the theoretical framework, the belief that feminism

[12] The cover page of this paper contains three covers from different issues of *Femeia*. "Femeia" translates from Romania to "the woman".

could not be found in communist states was misconstrued due to a focus on Western norms and language. In this context, Romania saw the enactment of a decision by the RCP's Central Committee meant to increase the participation of women in the political, social and economic spheres (Popa, 2009).

That being said, the RCP was under tighter political control than, for example, the Hungarian National Women's Council, which led to the eventual 'nationalisation' of the IWY's objectives. The RNCW considered that while it was necessary to ensure laws were enforced, there was no need for changes since there already was equality between the genders. Instead, articles in *Femeia* failed to mention the sex equality goal of the IWY and, instead, used it to highlight the achievements of the socialist state in the advancement of women's rights. Nonetheless, the processes undergone in the creation of the IWY marked multiple women and changed their worldviews (Popa, 2009).

Women post-communist Romania

The period that followed the 1989 revolution was one of transition, which was marked by a decline in certain rights previously enjoyed by women in communist states. As early as 1993, Barbara Einhorn published a study titled "Cinderella Goes to Market" in which she brought attention to this issue, warning everyone (Haan et al., 2019). Donert (2017) elaborates on this phenomenon, explaining how radical revisions during the 1990s were detrimental to women, affecting their employment and pensions as well as child care and divorce regulations. She explains that:

> *The so-called transition from socialism to capitalism offered new opportunities to some women - such as those with particular skills or working in sectors such as tourism - but overall resulted in disproportionate rates of female unemployment and loss of pension*

rights, as well as the withdrawal of subsidized services such as child care, at a moment when prices were rising. (Donnert, 2017, p.415)

The European Institute for Gender Equality has described the rhythm of change as being slow, with progress making 'snail steps' and even occasionally regressing (Grünberg et al., 2018).

Politics

Women's political representation is seen as a key indicator of the quality of democracy in Romania, therefore being a key factor to evaluate (Băluță & Tufiș, 2021). The transition from a non-democratic regime to a democratic one after the revolution saw a negative shift in women's access to politics and their ability to participate in the decision-making processes. In the 1990s, the representation of women completely collapsed.

As can be seen in Table 1, the representation of women in the national parliament has been critically low since the first elections post-Revolution. As shown in the previous section, in the 1980's women used to make up over 30 percent of the Great National Assembly (which was the highest legislative body - a value which has not been reached by the national parliament since. Gârboni (2014) explains these fluctuations, attributing them to changes in electoral systems. Following the establishment of political pluralism by decree in 1989, Romania conducted its first free and fair elections in 1990 under a proportional representation system. Subsequently, the electoral system was revised in 2008 to a single-constituency format, which resulted in a decline in the percentage of women in the Senate compared to the 2004 elections. While women may fare better in a proportional representation system, this only partly explains their low representation.

Table 1 (Băluță & Tufiș, 2021)

Political representation of women in the Romanian Parliament, 1990-2020

	1990	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020
% of women in the Chamber of Deputies	4.5%	3.8%	7.3%	11.0%	11.4%	11.4%	13.3%	20.7%	18.5%
% of women in the Senate	0.8%	2.1%	1.4%	7.9%	9.5%	5.8%	7.4%	15.4%	18.4%
% of women in Parliament	3.7%	3.3%	5.6%	10.1%	10.9%	9.8%	11.6%	19.1%	18.5%

Băluță & Tufiș (2021) mention several factors that help explain these persisting low numbers, among which are the predominant anti-feminist attitudes that have characterised the 30 years since communism, as well as numerous anti-gender campaigns.

While the proportion of women has finally escaped single digits, after the 2020 elections Romania ranked 124th globally and 25th in the European Union (Grupului Român al Uniunii Interparlamentare, 2021). The concerningly low numbers have appeared in the news on multiple occasions, even prompting an open letter from over 50 organisations and professors in 2023, which asked for the introduction of new gender quotas on the lists of candidates at parliamentary elections. They explain that the 2022 decree enacting a 33 percent quota for women on the candidate lists is rendered insufficient when women occupy the last positions in the lists. Instead, they proposed a 'zipper' system that alternates male and female candidates. Otherwise, despite women running in the elections, they do not enter the parliament (Stan, 2023).

Băluță and Tufiș (2021) explain that political parties are androcentric, favouring men's presence in leadership and decision-making positions. In attempts to change this, most political parties have taken steps towards the inclusion of women. For example, four of the six main political parties have specific articles in their statutes regarding the creation of women's organisations. These range from organisations that are seldom active and only have one sentence

informing the public of their purpose, to organisations with detailed plans on how to involve women and increase their decision-making power. For more information regarding each Party's organisations for women, see Băluță and Tufiș (2021, pp.8-10)'s article. It is important to note that some adopt a more conservative approach to women's roles, such as the AUR women's organisation, which prioritises a 'family-traditionalist' vision over focusing on gender equality. Another example is seen in how some parties (i.e. PULS) have articles regarding the necessity of having both genders represented in the candidate lists. In addition to this, some parties have set internal quotes to ensure the representation of women. The PSD has a 30% quota for all leadership structures - albeit this is not respected (Băluță & Tufiș, 2021; Gârboni, 2014).

There are regulations and laws in place meant to stimulate women's representation. For instance, a 2006 law on party financing allocated additional funding for those parties which placed women in the eligible seats of candidacy lists. Article 8 of the Regulation on Local Elections also states that "a 20% bonus is granted for female candidates, persons under the age of 30, persons of a different ethnicity than Romanian and persons with physical or sensory disabilities" (Băluță & Tufiș, 2021,p.12).

Despite all of these measures, Băluță and Tufiș (2021) have identified the first decrease in women's political representation since Romania's accession to the EU in 2007 with fewer women in the European and National Parliament, but also in the government (refer back to table 1.[13] This recent reversal is concerning. Additionally, men continue to be overrepresented in leadership positions, with women's presence in the governing structures of parties ranging from 8 to 27 percent. This is also seen outside these structures, with women being more likely to be elected onto local councils than for the position of mayor. In fact, the Gender Barometer from

[13] Further research could dive into the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in the regression of women's political representation in 2020.

2018 shows that Romanians are much more likely to prefer a male president than a woman, but this preference diminishes as the position for which one runs decreases in power. For example, only 25.9 percent of people prefer a male candidate for the local councils, with 63.7 percent stating that the sex of the candidate is irrelevant. The tendency to disregard gender when voting grows as the importance of the position diminishes. While only 43.1 percent of people state that sex does not matter for the presidency candidacy, this percentage increases when it comes to the following positions: mayor (52.6 percent); president of local council (55.8 percent); minister (56.3 percent); president of the parents' committee at school[14] (57.4 percent); school director (60.2 percent); deputee or senator (61.8 percent); and member of the local council (63.7 percent) (Grünberg, Rusu, Samoilă, 2019).

Women are also elected in much lower numbers than those that run for candidacy. In 2020, women made up 28.6 percent of candidates for the Chamber of Deputies, 30.6 percent for the Senate, and 29.3 percent overall for the Parliament. However, as shown in Table 1, the percentages of women actually elected were much lower, at 18.5, 18.4, and 18.5 percent, respectively. Similarly, in the 2020 local elections, 9.7 percent of the candidates were women, with only 5.4 percent being elected. This disparity is also evidenced within political parties, where candidates are strategically placed on candidate lists based on their gender, among other factors. In fact, "in all parties, women are under-represented in the first two positions on the lists for local councils" and they tend to be placed in ineligible positions, which diminishes their chances of being elected (Băluță & Tufiș, 2021, p.13). Proving this, Băluță and Tufiș (2021) construct a table (see table 2) showing the decrease from the percentage of women candidates to the percentage of those elected.

[14] For this position, more people prefer female (26.2%) candidates over male (14.6%)

Table 2 - Proportion of women among the Parties' candidates and elected officials

Party	% candidate women	% elected women
AUR	30.3	15.9
PNL	25.3	17.9
PSD	26.1	24.2
UDMR	27.1	10.3
USR-PLUS	27.4	18.8

Gârboni (2014) discusses another relevant issue. The presence of women in politics does not necessarily entail that they can represent their interests. Those who manage to overcome the social and structural barriers in politics often adopt male-dominated political behaviours, rhetoric, values, and attitudes when representing their party's interests. An example of the 'masculinisation' of women in politics was seen after the fall of communism when they proposed the legalisation of prostitution. Consequently, it can be seen that women align themselves with their male colleagues in an attempt to be accepted. Understanding this through Pitkin's classification of political representation (as summarised by Kurebwa, 2015), women are descriptively represented in politics (i.e. there is a match in the characteristics between the represented and the representatives), but not substantively (i.e. when there is a match between what a representative's actions and the interests of the represented).

Education

One of the domains analysed in the Gender Equality Index is 'knowledge', which is separated into two dimensions - attainment and participation, and segregation. Within the former, it is revealed that there is no gender gap regarding the amount of tertiary education graduates; 14 percent of women and 14 percent of men graduate. Notably, these figures are below the EU average (28 and 26 percent, respectively). Additionally, there is minimal difference in the

participation rates of men and women in formal or non-formal education and training (12 percent for women and 13 percent for men (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023b).

Conversely, in regards to the second dimension - segregation -, a gender gap exists in the amount of people that pursue tertiary studies in education, health and welfare, as well as humanities or arts (34 percent for women; 18 percent for men). Nonetheless, this gap is smaller than that at the EU level (43 percent for women; 21 percent for men) (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023b). This could be interpreted as the remnants of the gendered division of labour also seen during the communist regime, where gender norms limit one's access to certain sectors.

That being said, Romania fares very well when it comes to women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields. It has the second highest rate of female enrolment in the EU[15], being one of the only four member states to have a rate over 35 percent enrolment (European Commission, 2023).

Labour force

Another key area is the domain of work, which, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality (2023a, p.25), "plays a pivotal role, not only in fostering the cohesive functioning and advancement of societies, but also in establishing professional, personal, and family autonomy and well-being".

Donert (2017) explains that the sudden entry of socialist countries into the global economy disproportionately affected women, who lost their jobs and benefits. Consequently, many turned to sex work as a means of living. In fact, in 2010, Romanian sex workers made up 12 percent of those at the EU level (Rettman, 2010). Nevertheless, measures have since been

[15] Romania (36.8%) only ranks below Sweden (37.2%).

implemented to incentivise entry into the workforce, such as allowances for mothers returning to work with children under 3 years old (European Commission, 2021).

The employment rate for women in Romania is one of the lowest in the EU, with only 57.4 percent of women employed compared to 75 percent of men. Additionally, historical gender pay gaps have resulted in the highest gender gap in pensions in the EU, with a difference of 65 percent (European Commission, 2021).

Progress has been made, however, and Romanians now benefit from relatively equal compensation, with a remarkably low gender pay gap. As a matter of fact, the unadjusted gender pay gap was the second smallest in Europe in 2021, at 3.6 percent (European Commission, 2023; European Parliament, 2020). Furthermore, women have entered traditionally male-dominated scientific fields (Grünberg et al., 2018).

Despite this progress, pregnant women continue to face workplace discrimination, often having to hide their pregnancies from employers. Some are harassed by their superiors, who perceive pregnancy as leading to positive discrimination. As a result, these women are assigned increasingly difficult tasks and are asked to work overtime despite laws mandating reduced working hours for pregnant women. Consequently, many eventually quit their jobs to prioritize their health (Arun, 2022).

Using the Gender Barometer from 2018, Grünberg, Rusu and Samoilă (2019) found that women tend to be less content with their jobs than men. While 43.9 percent of men expressed satisfaction with their workplace, only 31.1 percent of women felt the same. This disparity between the genders could suggest possible continued gaps in the protection of women's rights or the opportunities available to them.

Studying the data from Romania's Gender Equality Index, it becomes clear that the work domain continues to be gendered. Having been split into two dimensions - participation; and segregation and quality of work -, all but one of the indicators show a significant gender gap. The first indicator within the participation dimension is the rate of full-time employment, with 58 percent of men falling in this category but only 39 percent of women. Additionally, women work on average 8 years less than men - with Romania also holding the record for the largest gap in retirement age in the EU (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023b; European Commission, 2023). Within the second dimension - segregation and quality of work -, women continue to be employed at higher rates in the fields of education, human health, as well as social work activities (women: 19 percent; men: 4 percent). As was the case in the education section, the gender gap within these latter figures is lower than that at the EU level (although the overall sum is also below the EU average). Furthermore, more men (34 percent) than women (25 percent) are able "to take one hour or two off during working hours to take care of personal or family matters (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023b)

Similarly to trends seen during communism, the gendered division of labour is also reflected in the private sphere. Women tend to be the ones that carry out chores, indicating that the double-burden has not yet been resolved. When interviewed, the Gender Barometer from 2018 revealed that women self-identify more than men as the ones who:

- "Iron clothes (82% of women, compared to 24% of men);
- Wash clothes (80% of women, compared to 26% of men)
- Prepare the food (77% of women, compared to only 25% of men);
- Wash the dishes (73% of women, compared to only 26% of men);

- Clean the house (71% of women, compared to only 26% of men).” (Grünberg, Rusu, Samoilă, 2019, p.74)

Holding the additional role of unpaid caregiver significantly impacts the ability of women to enter or remain in the labour market. Consequently, it is more common for women to have to reduce working hours, while men must increase them (potentially to compensate for the lost income). In fact, Romania has the largest gender gap in employment rates in the EU and this increases for households with three children or more (European Commission, 2023).

The tendency for women to adopt the role of the caretaker has massive consequences for their involvement in the labour force, with a recent study by the World Bank unveiling that the “[g]lobal gender gap is far bigger than previously thought” and that there is “no equality for working women in any country in the world” (Ahmed, 2024, para.1). Tea Trumbic, the report author, found that when considering the effects of childcare and safety problems (i.e. the need for safety policies), women have on average only 64 percent of the legal protections that men enjoy (a decrease from the previous approximation of 77 percent) (Ahmed, 2024). More information on this can be found in the upcoming subsection named “Relevant Laws”.

The reduction in the public provision of childcare services post-1989 has been contributing to women’s double-burden. The number of nurseries has decreased from 840 in 1990 to 286 in 2011, with the quantity of enrolled children falling from 47,239 children in 1990 to 12,967 in 2004. The number of pre-school centres has also plummeted from 12,599 in 1990 to 1,222 in 2012. The drastic cutback has resulted in significant challenges for low-income families who cannot afford private childcare options. Additionally, while parental leave is available for up to two years, public pre-schools do not accept children younger than three, creating a significant childcare gap (Băluţă, 2014).

Public Opinion

While the public perception regarding gender equality and women's political representation has improved since the fall of communism, it is still considered traditional and patriarchal in comparison to other democratic states. The 2018 Gender Barometer study characterises public discourse worldwide as increasingly marked by nationalist, fundamentalist and conservative tones (Grünberg et al., 2018). Additionally, Băluță and Tufiș (2021, p.19) share a similar perspective, arguing that "both in academia and in the public and political spheres, all three decades of democracy have seen a rejection of, and hostility towards, gender/feminist studies and the feminist agenda".

There is a clear mix of traditionalist and modern perceptions of gender roles and relations in Romania. Table 3 summarises data from the Gender Barometer (Grünberg et al., 2018 pp.12-15; Grünberg et al., 2019, pp.61-62; p.68; p.77; pp.99-100; pp.109-110; pp.115-116), which demonstrate that while gender norms have shifted, women are still expected to fulfil certain responsibilities. Romanians seem to hold contradictory and conflicting attitudes regarding various gender issues. For instance, although raising children is now viewed as the responsibility of both parents, women are still seen as the primary caretakers of the household, responsible for preparing food and performing household tasks.

Table 3 - Perceptions of gendered issues

Statement	**% of respondents in agreement with the statement**	**% of women in agreement with the statement**	**% of men in agreement with the statement**

“food preparation, home cleaning, washing of clothes and dishes, ironing of laundry are activities performed by women only”	71%-82% (depending on the activity)	N/A*	N/A*
“A woman must follow her husband”	64.6%	58.9%	70.6%
“The man is the head of the family”	69.8%	63.1%	77%
“men are more able to lead than women”	44.2%	37.9%	50.8%
[preference for a male president]	46.9%	44.3%	49.6%
"it is more of a woman's than a man's duty to handle household chores"	57.6%	59.2%	56.1%

"both spouses must earn money for family maintenance”	87%	89.9%	84.1%
"it's a good thing now that men can take paternal leave"	68%	78.1%	67.8%
“Both parents should be involved in raising children”	80.3%	80.7%	79.7%
“What women really want is to have a family and children, not a job”	28.8%	27.2%	30.4%
“University education is more important for a boy than a girl”	13.5%	12.2%	14.9%

** While the data regarding the percentages in which women and men self-identify as carrying out these specific tasks can be seen under the Labour Force subsection of this paper, I am hesitant to place these in the table. This is because the data does not represent the percentage of*

women or men who agree these chores are a woman's duty. It could be the case that women believe the gendered distribution to be discriminatory, but are not in a safe enough environment to ask their husbands to contribute.

As seen in Table 3, the Gender Barometer indicates that men are much more likely than women to agree that the man is the head of the family or that men are better able to lead. Additionally, individuals aged 60 and above were much more likely to agree with these statements, followed by those aged between 45-59 years old. The data collected also shows that these age and gender trends are also seen in those who believe that: a woman must follow her husband and that household chores are a woman's duty (Grünberg, Rusu and Samoilă, 2019). These groups of people either grew up or were adults during the communist regime, therefore there may be a correlation between entrenched patriarchal attitudes and having lived in communist Romania. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to deduce a causal link between the influence of living during communism and individuals' current gender beliefs. An alternative explanation would refer to the more progressive values of younger generations throughout the world - regardless of a communist past.

Although the data from the previous table show persisting patriarchal attitudes, they nevertheless represent an improvement from past years. Băluță and Tufiș (2021) provide statistics regarding some of the variables measured through the Gender Barometer in 2000 and 2018, showing the changes in people's perceptions regarding women's ability to hold managerial positions. Table 4 shows that now fewer Romanians think that women lack the capabilities to be leaders or that men are better leaders.

Table 4 - Perceptions of the role of women in management

% agree with the statement that ...	2000	2018	Change
Women are too busy with household chores and no longer have time for management positions	74%	46%	28%
Politics and business are corrupt and that's why women don't want to get involved	61%	46%	16%
Men are better able to lead than women	60%	46%	14%
Women are less united than men	54%	46%	8%
Women do not trust their strengths	50%	34%	17%
Women are afraid of great responsibilities	36%	31%	5%

Data source: Gender Barometer 2000 (Soros Foundation Romania) and Gender Barometer 2018 (FILIA Center).

Despite progress, some concerning views continue to be prevalent. For instance, a quarter of interviewed Romanians agree that a man can forbid his partner to have a group of friends, and approximately half of Romanians believe that rape is sometimes justified (Centrul FILIA, 2024; Centrul FILIA 2023).

Further evidence of the conservative views of the public is evident from the organisation of the 2018 referendum aimed at altering the Constitution to define the family exclusively as a union between a man and a woman (replacing the current version, which refers to marriage between ‘spouses’). The referendum failed as only 21.10 percent of the electorate voted, falling below the 30 percent threshold. Of those present, 91.56 percent voted in favour of the referendum, while the opposing camp chose to boycott the vote (Digi24, 2018). Spending over 32 million euros, this referendum generated divisive debates and discord within national parties. An analysis of why this referendum was initiated and subsequently failed is provided by Viski (2019).

The European Court of Human Rights even ruled in May 2023 that Romania is violating the European Convention on Human Rights by failing to recognise same-sex unions. The government appealed the decision in August but was rejected by the Court in September 2023.

Now, Romania is at risk of receiving financial sanctions if it does not recognise same-sex unions. When questioned regarding the implementation of the Court's ruling, Prime Minister Ciolacu stated that "the Romanian society is not ready for a decision at the moment. It is not one of my priorities and … I don't think Romania is ready" (Ilie, 2023, para.3). He also believes that this is not going to be the last time that Romania fails to enforce the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (Tiernan, 2023). These conservative views present significant challenges to advancing gender equality. By attempting to institutionalise a narrow understanding of the family, the referendum sought to undermine the rights of same-sex couples. The failure to accept queer couples perpetuates gender stereotypes, which hinders progress towards an inclusive and equal society. Among others, this affects queer women and mothers in non-traditional family structures by denying them legal protections and benefits. The referendum and the government's refusal to legalise same-sex unions suggest that the only acceptable family structure is one that aligns with traditional, patriarchal views.

Relevant laws

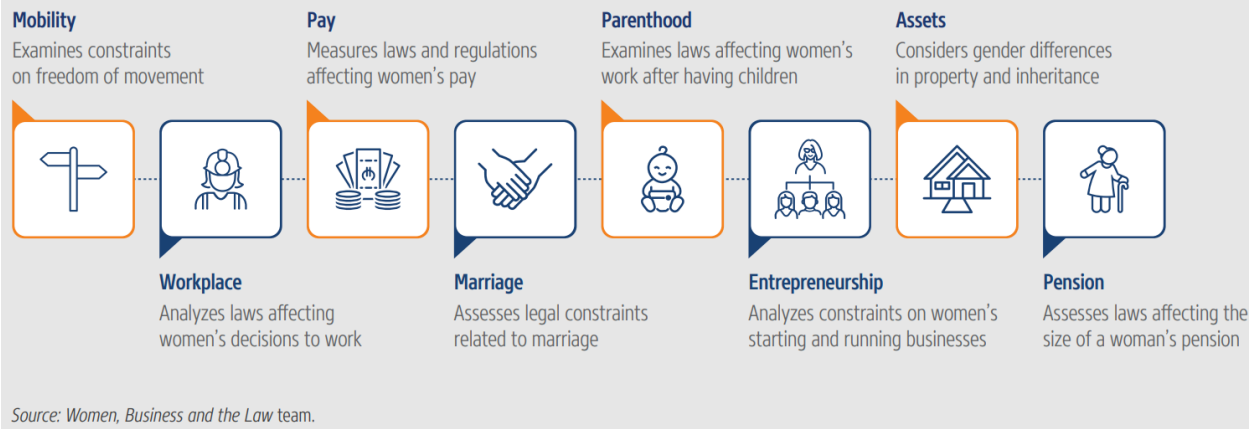
Gârboni (2014) elucidates how women's rights were used as a tool prior to 1989 and genuine efforts towards gender equality only took root during the mid/late 1990s amid EU accession negotiations. The legal principle of sex equality is maintained in post-communist legislation and there have been substantial steps in the creation of an institutional and legal framework to efficiently tackle gender issues (Băluță, 2015; Grünberg et al., 2018). The 2003 Constitution introduced an article explicitly aiming towards gender equality, stating in article 16(3) that:

> *Public positions and dignities, civil or military, may be held, under the law, by persons with Romanian citizenship and domicile in the country. The Romanian state guarantees equal opportunities between women and men for the occupation of these positions and dignities.* (Constituția României, 2003, self-translation, emphasis added)

In 2002, the Law for Equal Opportunity between Women and Men (202/2002) was enacted. This legislation was developed with the support of the Parliamentary Subcommittee for Equal Opportunities between Genders and various NGOs. It marked a significant advancement in women's rights, introducing numerous measures such as the prohibition of gender-based discrimination and domestic violence, as well as provisions ensuring the equality of men and women in decision-making positions. Unfortunately, backlash ensued due to its vague language, which only acknowledged an existing problem without establishing tools and incentives to resolve it (Gârboni, 2014). Băluţă and Tufiș (2021) criticise it for its failure to elaborate on how a balanced gender representation in the nomination of candidates can be obtained. Importantly, they add that "there are no sanctions providing for nullity of the lists in the event of non-compliance" (ibid, p.4). The lack of precise language and sanctions in the case of non-compliance renders ineffective the few existing measures meant to increase women's political representation.

The World Bank Group (2024) uses the *Women, Business and the Law Index* to identify laws that restrict the economic inclusion of women by making use of eight indicators, which can be seen in the figure below.

Figure 1 - Women, Business and the Law 1.0 Index. Indicators



According to the Women, Business and the Law report, Romania is not one of the 14 economies which grant equal legal rights to women and men. Nonetheless, its score of 90.6 out of 100 places it in the top 49 of the countries. More equal laws lead to a greater empowerment of women and greater economic resilience. This, in turn, is "associated with more women working, higher wages, more women owned businesses, and more women in managerial positions and parliaments" (World Bank Group, 2024, p.3)

Recently, an updated version of this index has been created - the *Women, Business and the Law 2.0*. This is better equipped to provide a clearer picture of women's economic opportunities by focusing on three dimensions: 1) the legal framework; 2) frameworks that support the laws' implementation; 3) expert opinions on the laws' outcomes. This new index enabled the World Bank to realise that the global gender gap is wider than previously thought. Romania was one of the many countries that saw its previous score decrease, with its legal framework now scoring only 82.5 (out of 100). The supportive frameworks in place to help implement the enacted laws fared even worse, receiving a score of only 45.0. This means that legal provisions are ineffectively implemented into a tangible reality, remaining empty promises in regard to helping women realise their rights. In regards to the export opinions index, this is

used in areas that are difficult to observe quantitatively (e.g. childcare quality), making use of 10 indicators (pension, mobility, assets, parenthood, entrepreneurship, marriage, workplace, pay, childcare and safety). Of course, these opinions could be shaped by biases, heuristics, or unavailable information and represent subjective evaluations based on their expertise. In this area, Romania scores 87.5 out of 100, indicating that most women "are perceived to enjoy generally the same rights as men" (World Bank Group, 2024, p.81, emphasis added)

Reproductive rights

Modern Romania is characterised by high rates of infant mortality; a relatively high proportion of NEET women (i.e. not engaged in education, employment, or vocational training); and high teenage pregnancy rates. These factors tend to reinforce one another, contributing to broader socio-economic challenges (Grünberg et al., 2018).

While the number of teen births in Romania has decreased since communist times, it continues to be the highest value in the European Union (Eurostat, 2017). In fact, one-quarter of all minor mothers in the EU live in Romania (Pavaluca, 2021). Two crucial factors that help explain these trends are: 1) the difficulty with which abortions are obtained in Romania; 2) the lack of education on reproductive rights in schools.

Abortion is currently legal in Romania, with women able to obtain one 'on demand' until the fetus reaches 14 weeks; or until 24 weeks in medical cases. According to the 2020-2021 report titled "Refusal of Abortion on Demand in Romania" the situation is not that simple. Despite women having the right to abortions, 40 percent of hospitals (i.e. 69 of the 171 hospitals researched) refuse to perform them on demand. The most invoked reason for refusing abortions is on religious grounds. The situation further declines when overlooking a hospital's official stance and contacting them directly by telephone - in this case, only approximately 25 percent

offered abortion on demand. Moving down at the individual level, only 34 percent of all specialised obstetrician gynaecologists agree to perform such procedures. Another shocking fact is that the price for this can range between hospitals from 70 lei (14.06 euros) to 1200 lei (241.11 euros). During the pandemic state of alert, only one single hospital (a private one) continued to offer abortions, with a cost of 3000 lei (602.77 euros, i.e. double the minimum wage) (Centrul FILIA, 2020).

These shocking statistics show the dire current situation of reproductive rights in Romania. In fact, over 300 women have had unsafe abortions between 2020 and 2023 due to the difficulty of obtaining one in medical institutions (FILIA, 2023). Additionally, numerous anti-choice NGOs have built pregnancy crisis centres where they convince women to keep their fetuses by providing incorrect and biased information (Centrul FILIA, 2020).

Another factor contributing to the high rates of teenage births is the inadequate sexual education in schools. The Romanian Orthodox Church has publicly opposed the introduction of sexual education classes in schools, claiming that compulsory courses would constitute “an assault on the innocence of children, hindering their natural development and marking them for life” (Marina, 2021, para.9, self-translation). In their view, it is a lie that the absence of sexual education is the cause of Romania leading the EU regarding the number of teenage mothers; the number of young people with HIV; or the reason for Romania having the youngest grandmother in the world - who is 23 years old (Marina, 2021; Pavaluca, 2021). Instead, what is to blame is: 1) the dissolution of the family; and 2) school dropout. The Church added that the state cannot impose any ideology (such as gender ideology) onto students without parental consent as this opposes the true purpose of education - the formation of children in the spirit of the highest moral values and virtue ethics (Marina, 2021).

In Romania, a class on “Education for health” - which includes aspects of sexual education such as sexually transmitted diseases and contraception - is offered as an optional course. This opportunity was created through a law in 2004, which allowed any students in school to learn about these critical issues. However, in 2022, heated debates in Parliament but also public spaces led to a regression in the law. Now, this optional class can only be taught to students in Grade 8 and only with parental consent. This is a critical setback, where parents can interfere with a minor’s right to information with regard to their own body. It can also lead to teenagers obtaining misinformation through the internet. When comparing this with other European countries (e.g. Sweden, Finland, Germany, and the UK), where sexual education is mandatory and adapted to different age groups, Romania’s approach seems outdated and ill-equipped to deal with equipping the youth to make informed decisions about their reproductive health. The birth rate among mothers aged 10 to 14 years old is 10 times higher than the EU average seen in 2021. Furthermore, these trends have increased in comparison to a decade ago (Mihăilă, 2023).

Domestic violence

Awareness of domestic violence only began to be seen as a problem in the mid-1990s. By 2000, the Penal Code created sanctions for those that engage in acts of violence against family members - including the criminalisation of marital rape. In 2003, a law on the prevention of family violence was enacted, which expanded the understanding of domestic violence beyond physical forms, to include: “any physical or verbal act committed intentionally by a family member against another member of the same family that causes physical, psychological, or sexual suffering, or material damage” (American Bar Association, 2007, p.5)

Domestic violence and sexual harassment are factors that negatively affect women's empowerment, as well as the participation of women in the labour force and their capacity to escape poverty (World Bank Group, 2024).

As previously discussed, the employment rate for women in Romania is one of the lowest in the EU, with only 57.4 percent of women being employed. This makes women more vulnerable to intimate partner violence since economic dependence on husbands decreases women's ability to stand up for themselves (Dhungel et al., 2017).

Domestic violence continues to be common in Romania, with one out of three women having been assaulted physically or sexually by their partner at least once in their lives. In fact, in solely the first half of 2022, there were over 26,000 cases of domestic violence (Centrul FILIA, 2023; A.L.E.G., 2019). The European Court of Human Rights has even fined Romania for its insufficient commitment to tackling this issue, with statistics showing that over 60 percent of Romanians see domestic violence as occasionally justified (BBC, 2017).

Civil society

After the fall of communism, the Romanian civil society experienced a significant transformation. The new political freedom allowed for the establishment of numerous NGOs and social movements. These organizations played a crucial role in addressing social issues, promoting human rights, and advocating for democratic reforms. The 1990s saw a surge in civic engagement, with citizens actively participating in public discourse and community initiatives. Over time, civil society has become increasingly diverse and influential, contributing to policy changes and holding the government accountable. In fact, it played a crucial role in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, challenges such as fragility, a lack of sustainability, and

a lack of trust from the public persist. There is also a lack of data on civil society due to a failure to collect and disseminate data (Cibian, 2022).

Currently, the Ministry of Health is collaborating with associations such as “Sexul vs Barza” (i.e. “sex versus the stork”) to create a pilot programme aimed at training teachers on how to effectively teach sexual education in schools. This program covers topics such as gender equality, sexuality, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases and partner violence (Mihăilă, 2023). Such efforts demonstrate the progress made by Romania, with the state now working alongside various non-governmental organisations to promote gender equality and critical issues.

ACCEPT is another example of an active organisation. This was the first established NGO that advocated for the rights of LGBTQ+ people, making significant strides towards equality. They even helped bring a crucial case to the European Court of Human Rights, which consequently condemned Romania for failing to legalise same-sex unions (Margarit, 2019; Tiernan, 2023).

Comparison to other countries today

In order to better demonstrate the lagging nature of women’s emancipation in Romania, it is helpful to make comparisons to other countries. It is clear that Romania has made strides towards gender equality over the past three decades, it is currently at a significant distance away from other EU countries. As has been touched upon already, the view of women in Romania still has patriarchal notes, with many continuing to hold conservative views regarding what is expected of men or of women. For instance, nearly half of Romanians (48 percent) would agree that men’s role is to be the breadwinner, while women must take care of the family and home. This is nearly double the EU average (26 percent) and much higher than in Scandinavian countries (10 percent) (Băluță & Tufiș, 2021)

Table 5 illustrates changes in the Gender Inequality Index (GII) over three time periods - 1990 (right after the fall of communism); 2000 and 2022 (the most recent value available). Romania is listed alongside other ex-communist countries and several Western countries. Greece is included as a non-communist Eastern country with comparable levels of development (although Greece has been an EU member state since 1981). The GII combines three dimensions into a single index ranging from 0 to 1, where a lower value indicates greater gender equality, while a higher value indicates greater disparities between genders. The dimensions consist of 1) reproductive health; 2) empowerment; and 3) labour market participation. The indicators that each dimension consists of can be seen in Figure 2 (United Nations Development Program, 2022).

Figure 2 - The Dimensions and Indicators of the Gender Inequality Index

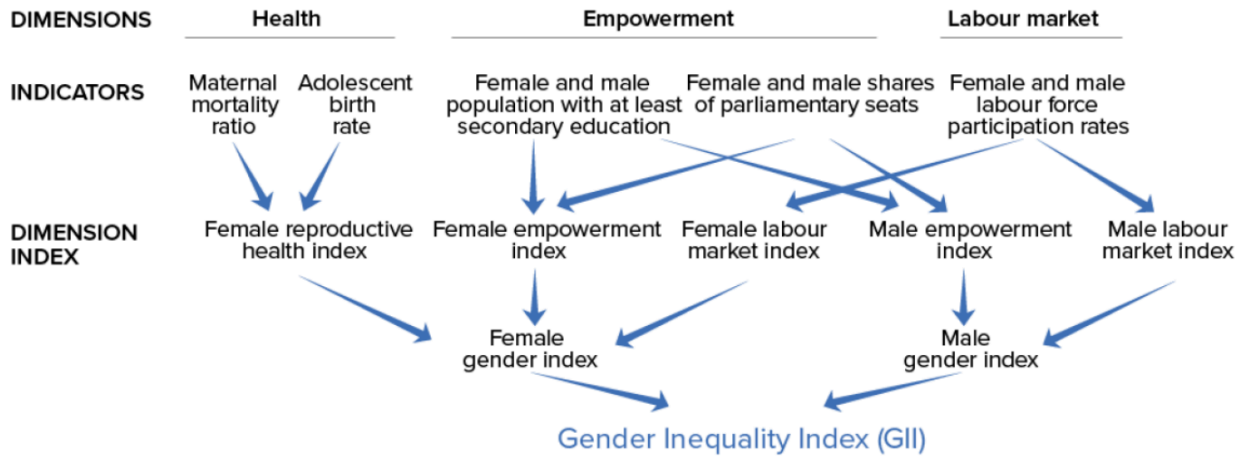


Table 5 demonstrates that Romania has consistently scored below the world average values. Romania's high GII from 1990 can be attributed to the significant political and social upheavals during the transition to democracy. It would be beneficial to identify the GII value from 1989 to understand how much backsliding there was post-revolution, but this value is

unavailable. Assuming that Barbara Einhorn's study titled "Cinderella Goes to Market" (as previously introduced) was correct, Romania's high GII in 1990 would align with the theories regarding the setbacks in women's rights post-communism. Romania has made significant progress towards equality since, yet it continues to have the highest index among all included countries.

Greece consistently outperformed Romania, highlighting the need to compare Eastern countries with and without a communist past to assess the impact of communism on the GII. The ex-communist countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Serbia) also show better outcomes than Romania, which begs the question of whether Romania was unique among its ex-comrade states. Did other ex-communist states not lag after their revolutions? Western countries exhibit lower indices than their Eastern neighbours, which reinforces the discussion surrounding how Western feminism surpassed 'feminist'[16] communist movements (as explained in the theoretical framework).

Table 5 - Gender Inequality Index (data collected from: United Nations Development Program, 2022)

	Gender Inequality Index		
Country	**1990** *World average: 0.579*	**2000** *World average: 0.555*	**2022** *World average: 0.452*
Romania	0.520	0.429	0.230

[16] 'Feminist' is put between quotation marks as there continues to be a discussion regarding whether the communist gender policies truly were feminist or not.

Greece	0.299	0.205	0.120
Serbia (after the dissolution of Yugoslavia)	-	0.255[17]	0.119
Bulgaria	0.362	0.333	0.206
Hungary	0.341	0.284	0.230
Poland	0.293	0.202	0.105
France	0.235	0.195	0.084
Germany	0.183	0.133	0.071
Italy	0.241	0.187	0.057
United Kingdom	0.252	0.214	0.094
The Netherlands	0.122	0.100	0.025

As previously mentioned, Romania ranks 124th globally and 25th in the European Union when it comes to women's political representation (Grupului Român al Uniunii Interparlamentare, 2021). For a breakdown of the first value, one can refer to the IPU-UN Women map, which includes global rankings for women in government and executive positions (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021).

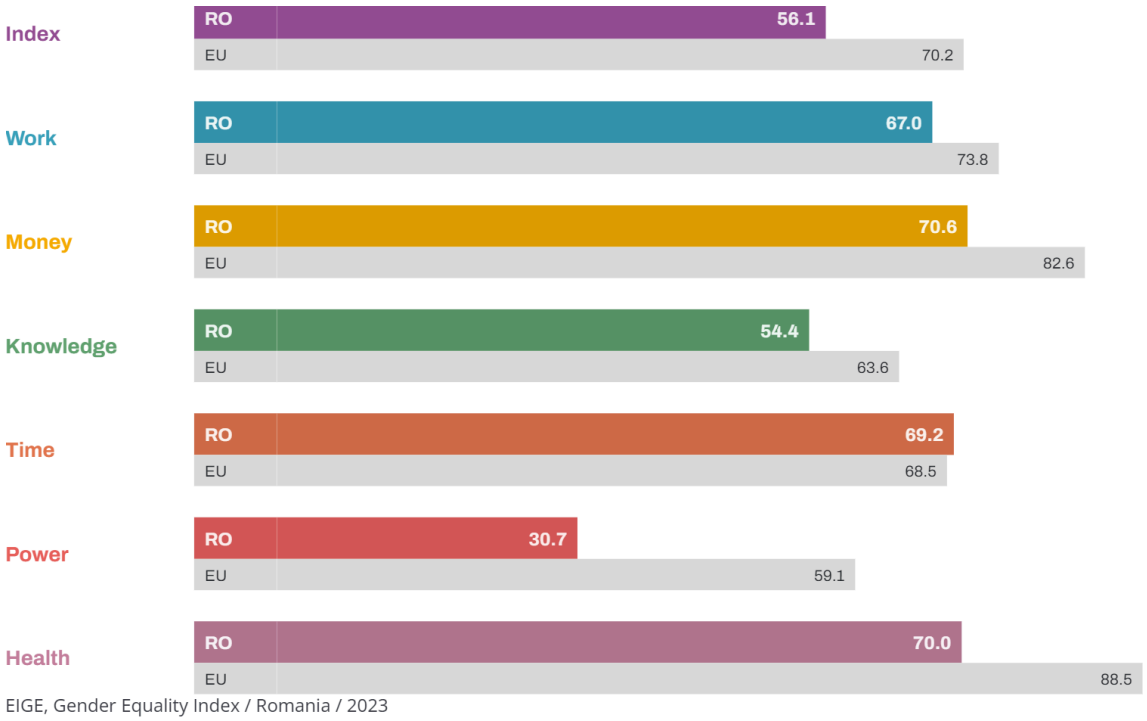
[17] The earliest value available was 2006

More recent data from the 2023 Gender Equality Index actually places Romania last in the European Union when it comes to Gender Equality, with only 56.1 out of 100 points. Figure 3 shows a breakdown of the index into multiple dimensions. Two large areas in need of improvement are health and power (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024). The low value in the domain of power refers to the unequal gender balance in the highest decision-making positions in the political, economic, and social spheres. These spheres can be understood through the following explanation:

> *The sub-domain of political power looks at the representation of women and men in national parliaments, governments, and regional/local assemblies. The sub-domain of economic power examines the proportions of women and men on the corporate boards of the largest nationally registered companies and national central banks. The sub-domain of social power includes data on decision-making in research funding organisations, public broadcasters, and the most popular national Olympic sport organisations.* (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023a).

The lacking performance in this domain is not surprising considering the statistics previously presented in this paper. The domain of health, on the other side, measures three dimensions: health status, health behaviour, and access to health services. The lagging aspect of this index is partly explained by the disastrous effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023a).

Figure 3 - The Gender Equality Index. Comparison between Romania and the EU average



EIGE, Gender Equality Index / Romania / 2023

Discussion

This section will first classify the women-friendly policies of Socialist Romania as a form of State Feminism, supporting this argument with evidence. Following this, the shortcomings of this type of feminism in Romania will be elaborated upon, explaining how they may have contributed to the stagnation of women's emancipation post-1989. Lastly, more factors that also stalled women's advancement will be included.

State Feminism

The first volume of the Aspasia Journal included a Forum in which Miroiu (2007) published an article titled "Communism was a State Patriarchy, not State Feminism". Within this, she argues that although communism helped women, it did not give them autonomy, as feminism dictates. Therefore, the author concludes that no gender policies from this era were feminist and

that the main explicit command was to “Cut off feminism: it is deviationist, dangerous and bourgeois” (as cited in Miroiu, 2007, p.199). The following sections will partially disagree with these conclusions, arguing that although communism dismissed the term ‘feminism’, this was only aimed at its Western conception. As explained in the theoretical framework, socialism rejected this term, but still showed some similar attitudes towards the advancement of women’s rights. This paper chooses to characterise the gender policies found in Romania as a type of state feminism.

*

As previously explained, gender policies during socialism are often looked down upon and criticised, however more recent literature has countless times shown how “women are the biggest losers of the political regime changes in Eastern Europe after 1989” (Pető, 2016, p.109). Women’s job opportunities decreased, the feminisation of poverty persisted, healthcare and social service systems malfunctioned and women’s political participation became minimal. State feminism is a possible analytical tool to observe the socialist gender policies.

In 1987, Helga Hernes coined the term ‘State Feminism’, defining it as “a variety of public policies and organizational measures, designed partly to solve general social and economic problems, partly to respond to women’s demands.” (as cited in Mazur & McBride, 2008, p.247). They are both driven from below - by grassroots agitation - and from above - by state integration. Initially, this concept was used to understand the support of Scandinavian states for gender equality and scholars dove into the interaction between women’s movements and so-called ‘women’s policy agencies’ (WPAs). WPAs are government-based mechanisms charged with advancing women’s rights by ensuring that gender equality is considered in the formulation of policies and incorporating ideas from women’s movements. They are an institutionalised

counter to the patriarchal characteristics of the state, working to create a bridge between the women's movement and the state (Mazur & McBride, 2008; Goertz & Mazur, 2008).

Overtime, 'state feminism' evolved beyond the Western democratic context, going on to describe the institutionalisation of feminism within state agencies across different political systems. In the context of Maoist China, Zheng (2005) uses 'state feminism' to refer to a state that (inconsistently) advocates for the liberation of women. She criticises those who claim that the All-China Women's Federation was only an organ of the Communist party, writing that:

> *"The lack of desire or imagination to excavate women's role in the policymaking process in the socialist state may have much to do with a fast-held assumption about the socialist state: it is too centralized and monolithic to have any space for women's intervention"* (Zheng, 2005, p.520).

Zheng (2005) examines how the aforementioned assumption neglects the diverse contributions of thousands of women officials in Maoist China. In her eyes, for a feminist movement to be effective, it needs to place itself within the Party's boundaries to be missed by masculinist leaders. Thus, policies are not merely orders from the party, but they also express women's agenda. Zhou (2023) further provides evidence of how state feminism can be found in communist contexts, referring to the Chinese policies promoting maternal care and women's political participation.

Since state feminism is generally used to examine Western nations, its components must be contextualised when studying Eastern European regimes. Mazur and McBride (2008) explain that the concept must be adjusted for authoritarian systems, highlighting the need to accommodate different understandings of feminism throughout the world.

While rarely used in the case of Eastern Europe, it becomes clear that state feminism can occur within communism, too. Ghodsee (2014) analysed the Bulgarian Women's Movement, showing how the National Women's Committee successfully represented Bulgarian women's interests despite operating within the restrictive communist framework. She also hints at the double standards in the treatment of Eastern and Western European feminisms, noting that the integration of feminism with the state was viewed positively in Western democracies but criticised in Eastern states. Scholars accused Eastern states of using state feminism to control and take advantage of the women's movements - instead of also focusing on the positive changes made under communism. Thus, there was a biased perception that State feminism was detrimental in the East but normative and effective in the West.

In the context of the initial target of state feminism - the Scandinavian states -, Hernes coined the term 'women-friendly' to describe the states which create generous policies that help women balance their work, children and public life, without having to make sacrifices exceeding those of men (Borchorst & Siim, 2008). This aligns with the policies that the socialist regime enacted (e.g. reduced working hours for mothers; and childcare facilities).

Lastly, when found in communist settings, state feminism is often a tool utilised by male elites in their policies aimed at gaining women's support. Although initially leading to the advancement of women's interests, their support recedes as the control of the state intensifies (Mazur & McBride, 2008). This could explain the reversal of the legalisation of abortion in Romania, as the dictator decided that increasing birth rates by any means was more important than women's needs.

*

State feminism exists on a spectrum, varying from 'full' state feminism to 'none'. Mazur and McBride (2008) outline five necessary conditions for a full level of state feminism: 1) the presence of a WPA; 2) the presence of a woman's movement; 3) the integration of the demands of the women's movement into the state; 4) the inclusion of women's movement actors into the state; and 5) the production of feminist outcomes. The latter dimension includes two possible outcomes, where WPAs must either generate a) feminist political processes (i.e. integrating the feminist movement into policy-making) or b) feminist social impacts (i.e. improving women's conditions and promoting gender equality).

In Romania, the RNCW qualifies as a WPA since it operated under the influence of the communist party to advance women's rights. The second dimension - the presence of a woman's movement - is harder to identify due to the heavy repression of civil society (A.L.E.G., 2019). Nonetheless, dissent was still possible, as evidenced by the work of Petrescu (2014). Given that scholars have noted the need for adjustments when applying state feminism to non-Western states, this paper argues that the second and third dimensions were at least partially fulfilled. There are numerous cases where the RNCW advocated for women's interests and fought for their rights, sometimes even opposing the state[18].

One can argue that the fourth dimension was fulfilled, as anyone could join the party-affiliated RNCW. The fifth requirement was also met as the RNCW helped implement women-friendly policies that improved their quality of life (e.g. easing the double burden; advocating for women's political representation; improving childcare facilities and maternal protection policies). Thus, using Mazur and McBride (2008)'s criteria, the RNCW qualifies as at least a case of partial state feminism. This is because, although the Council achieved some

[18] These instances have been discussed earlier in this paper and will be revisited in the upcoming sections.

successful feminist social impacts, its influence over public policy was limited, as seen with Ceausescu's rejection of the Council's recommendations on increasing birth rates. To argue that there was no state feminism in Romania, one would have to prove a lack of involvement or impact of the WPA in policy debates.

Zhou (2023) synthesises McBride and Mazur's later work, which categorises state feminism into a more detailed typology (see Table 6). Romania likely qualifies as 'marginal state feminism' or, less likely, an 'insider' type. This classification is due to their advocacy for the interests of ordinary women, coupled with a limited ability to gender political debates. For example, this was seen in the crucial role that the RNCW played in formulating the International Women's Year of 1975 at the international and regional levels. However, the IWY's goals were later nationalised to showcase socialism's progressiveness rather than effecting substantial changes. Thus, the RNCW was only partly successful in gendering debates with the demands of women's movements.

Zhou (2023) argues that illiberal forms of state feminism are not inherently oppressive and ineffective. Nonetheless, WPAs face multiple institutional dilemmas, which determine the quality of state feminism. One such dilemma arises from the WPA's status as the sole officially acknowledged and state-sponsored agency. While the RNCW could bridge the interests of women with the party, their "Communist Party-affiliated institutional nature" (Zhou, 2023, p.4) could lead to the misrepresentation of women's interests. This occurs due to the repression of non-official women's movements, resulting in a monopolisation of women's representation. An example of this was seen when *Femeia* magazine shifted its focus to emphasise women's paramount role as mothers in attempts to increase birth rates.

Table 6 - State feminism typology

Alliance typology for WPAs in state feminism, McBride and Mazur (2010).

	WPA gender-mainstreams political frames	WPA does not gender-mainstream political frames
WPA agrees with movement frames	Insider	Marginal
WPA does not agree with movement frames	Anti-Movement	Symbolic

A flawed feminism

This paper does not attempt to ignore the irreconcilable differences found between communism and our current understanding of feminism. It is true that the communist approach towards gender equality, as previously mentioned, appears to try to erase the differences between men and women. In this way, women are moulded and freed only insofar that their experiences match with those of men (e.g. providing childcare facilities to enable women to join the workforce). Even then, however, communism did not fully succeed in this goal as women continued to be encumbered by - for example - the 'double-burden' originating from the socialised childcare facilities that left much to be desired. Băluță even makes reference to a 'triple-burden' created by women having to balance family, work, and politics. Nevertheless, focusing on the ideal that communism was working towards, one cannot disregard the real progress that was achieved during the latter half of the 20th century. It is inappropriate to judge the advances in women's rights during communist Romania by using Western, more modern feminist frameworks. The departure of feminism from the liberal assumption that men and women are equal and existing laws must be implemented ubiquitously (as opposed to altering contemporary standards, rules or structures) is a development that has endlessly helped women's

fight towards true equality, but this recent change cannot be used as a lens to retrospectively claim that the gender policies during communism were not feminist. Romania after World War II and up until the 1989 Revolution was very different from today and its specific socio-political environment must be taken into account and progress must be acknowledged despite its flaws. Feminist theory is constantly evolving, but this should not preclude us from appreciating the progress made in its infancy. Novikova (2007) mirrors a similar sentiment, wondering if retrospectively referring to something as (anti-) feminist by today's standards will not lead to misunderstandings and an oversimplification of the past. She concludes by stressing the importance of recognizing the diverse forms of women's activisms worldwide and highlighting the need to be aware of our current assumptions and biases that influence scholarship.

Mazur and McBride (2008) believe that a reason for the lack of research linking State Feminism to former communist countries is the negative connotation that the term 'feminism' holds, which evokes memories of western imperialism and of cultural domination. Relatedly, one may argue that using State Feminism as a lens contradicts the previous statement that it is inappropriate to judge the gender policies of communist Romania through Western, more modern feminist frameworks. Daskalova (2007) also questions if this Western concept is appropriate and eventually decides in its favour, explaining that:

> *If we can accept the notion of 'state feminism' (referring to the institutionalisation of feminist interests) for these cases, and especially for Maoist China, why would it be unacceptable to name the ('woman friendly') measures introduced by the East European socialist regimes 'state feminism'? A possible answer would be: there is no research done on this topic* (Daskalova, 2007, p.217).

Moreover, with scholars having conceded that the concept must be adapted from context to context, the previous section has shown that it is possible to classify communist gender policies as having occurred under State Feminism. Using this term, and 'feminism' in general, will facilitate the entrance of women-friendly communist policies into the wider sphere. The progress made under the authoritarian regime - despite its numerous flaws - should and will be acknowledged. In this way, not only will scholars be better able to understand the past of former communist countries, but the history of feminism will be rewritten to account for the contribution of socialist gender policies in the international arena (as will be discussed later on).

The upcoming subsections will argue against the claims that feminism (and therefore state feminism) could not have existed in Romania because of a) the authoritarian nature of the regime; b) the lack of autonomy and agency of the women's organisations; c) the instrumentalisation of women; and d) the persisting patriarchal norms.

The authoritarian nature of the communist regime

A deplorable flaw of gender policies before 1989 is the context in which they occurred. The authoritarian nature of the regime exerted profound effects on personal freedoms. As already touched upon, Communist Romania was characterised by severe scarcity; a repressive secret police; censorship; propaganda; the repression of the civil society; and the centralisation of power (primarily under the 'Ceausescu Clan'). These authoritarian tools unquestionably curtailed the rights and liberties of all citizens - irrespective of gender. This paper acknowledges these realities without contestation.

Lack of autonomy

An area that does leave room for interpretation is the lack of autonomy in communist Romania, which Miroiu (2007) describes as being contradictory to feminism. Her critique underlines that women did not achieve true autonomy or self-determination, since their rights were defined by the state's needs rather than by a genuine feminist agenda.

While the Party's authoritarian grip on the country was clear, it is essential to consider the nuanced ways in which women learnt to navigate and make use of state structures to advance their rights and interests. As seen in the work of Haan and others (2016), one must account for women who were not coerced, misled or used by the Party; rather they were dedicated to fighting for justice and for women's emancipation and believed that the communist Party was a good route. Women's autonomy emerged as a negotiation between state structures and feminist agendas.

In fact, women often aligned their goals with those of the Communist Party as this was more effective in the Eastern bloc context as opposed to using 'bourgeois' feminist approaches and arguments. Activists also learnt how to use communist rhetoric as a strategic tool. Massino and Penn (2009, p.5) add that "women activists who participated in official women's organizations did have some limited agency and were not all slavishly loyal to the party platform, and that their stories are an important part of the history of state socialist Eastern Europe". Therefore, even if women may have not obtained complete autonomy, this did not preclude them from learning to work within existing constraints and enjoying the rights they did have.

Ghodsee (2014) adds to the discussion by criticising the Western perspective that views women's emancipation as requiring autonomous, individual subjects who sideline the focus on

bettering one's material living standards in favour of concentrating on improving life quality. She sees this as a culturally insensitive universalisation of the Anglo-American understanding of feminism. Ghodsee (2014) argues that communist women's organisations achieved significant advancements in literacy, education, legal equality, labour force participation, and reproductive rights - all of which contributed to the self-actualisation of women and the improvement of their standard of living. Despite this progress, Western scholars often dismissed these organisations and achievements due to their top-down nature and lack of independence from the state. Thus, the author calls for a broader understanding of self-actualisation to "reconsider women's movements and organizations that have been previously regarded as insufficiently feminist because they do not focus exclusively on the individual" (Ghodsee, 2014, p.541).

Autonomy is central to many feminist theories, yet other perspectives place a greater emphasis on collective empowerment and societal change. For example, socialist feminism emphasises the need for collective action, such as improved labour rights, to address the structural inequalities that affect women's lives. Intersectional feminism also recognises the need to go beyond individual women's experience in order to address the overlapping systems of oppression and benefit diverse groups.

Daskalova (2007) also critiques the tendency of scholars like Miroiu (2007) to adopt a universal attitude to feminism, overlooking the differences in feminist practices worldwide. The effect of this is the misrepresentation of the progress seen during communism, which was undeniably at least in part pro-women and women-friendly. Furthermore, she implies that Miroiu's definition of autonomy is too rigid, questioning if "women from the contemporary Western democracies, even those from the most advanced Nordic countries with 'woman-friendly' policies, [could] fulfil Mihaela Mirou's ideal of autonomy?" (Daskalova,

2007, p.216). The researcher concludes by asserting that one cannot take such a definitive stance on (the lack of) feminism in state socialism without extensive comparative research on women's histories.

Agency

Popa (2009) argues that state socialist women's organisations and their contribution to international feminism have been greatly overlooked. As previously touched upon, such trends - Popa argues -, are tied to entrenched beliefs about equality and activism under state socialism. In the early post-revolution feminist scholarship, researchers claimed that any policies aimed at improving women's lives were subordinated to the party's interests and all socialist women's organisations promoting women's rights were mere propaganda tools. Additionally, international relations and women's movements scholars underscored (or even effaced) the contribution of women from Eastern Europe to discourses of "equality, development, and peace" (Popa, 2009, p.60). The views of Nanette Funk would fall under this. Furthermore, some researchers claim that feminist scholarship still continues to be heavily influenced by the biases remaining from the Cold War against communist women (Ghodsee, 2014).

More recently, scholars have begun to question such assumptions.[19] As shown in the subsection on the Romanian National Council of Women, there is evidence of institutional agency, seen in the Council's occasional opposition to the Communist Party's policies, as well as in their involvement in advancing women's rights at the international level (e.g. the RNCW's proposal regarding the International Women's Year). Popa (2009, p.60) adds that the representatives of the RNCW embraced goals surrounding gender equality, peace and

[19] Such as the works found in the Aspasia Journal that were mentioned in this paper (e.g. Haan, Popa); and in Zheng (2005)'s work on State Feminism in Maoist China

development “as their own, and not as party directives”. The activities and processes carried out were a consequence of women’s activism, not of the party’s interests.

The lacking performance in the later stages of the IWY, along with Ceausescu’s complete disregard for the RNCW’s recommendations to raise birth rates and his subsequent punishment for their dissent, demonstrates a reduced ability of the RNCW to change national policies. This, however, does not negate the existence of agency expressed in other ways, through the ‘language’ of the Party in order for actors to protect themselves. As noted by Zheng (2005) in the context of Maoist China, gender equality policies can reflect women's own agendas and are not solely driven by party commands. In other words, identification of the women’s national organisation “with the Party did not exclude the possibility of expressing their own gendered visions of a socialist state” (Zheng, 2005, p.538).

Instrumentalisation of women

In her article, Gherbea (2015) states the following:

> *Indisputably, the communist regimes formulated and "implemented" policies which had women as the target group. Among these policies we can mention: social policies; familial policies ; economic and employment policies; policies to stimulate social-political participation and representation (including the universalisation of the right to vote); the politics of sexuality* (Gherbea, 2015, p.30, self-translation).

It is argued, however, that the primary objective of the gender policies implemented by the Communist Party was never to achieve the real emancipation of women. Instead, the Party highlighted women’s rights as a method to legitimise the Party’s superiority - in front of its citizens, but also other countries - and to draw attention away from its repressive and violent

characteristics. Alongside the instrumentalisation of women as an ideological strategy, the Party also had an economic reason. More working people meant higher production rates (Ghebrea, 2015; Zhou, 2023).

Additionally, Ghebrea (2015) heavily criticises the communist regime for its failure to achieve an 'equality of opportunity' between men and women, instead adopting policies and laws that centre around 'equality of treatment'. By 'equality of treatment' the author refers to the identical treatment of men and women (overlooking their distinctions), which tends to work towards discriminating against women and marginalising their experiences that are not in line with those of men. It applies the dominant standards (which are masculine) to women. This paper, however, diverges from this view. It is, indeed, true that societies should strive for an 'equality of opportunity' approach - where there is not only formal equality between the genders but substantive equality. This view was previously highlighted through the 'difference feminism' approach, which recognizes the different experiences of women and men and the necessity for laws to protect women's specific needs. Still, it must be noted that difference feminism emerged much later than liberal feminism to respond to its limitations. To be able to reach the 'equality of opportunity', it is first needed to obtain an 'equality of treatment'. How else would one be able to tell what specific needs must be fulfilled in relation to a certain demographic group without first having them try out the existing approach? After being excluded from the workforce for so long, how would governments know which policies are needed to help women excel and make up for the long-term effects of this exclusion without first adding them to the workforce? It is impossible to identify women's needs in the public sphere while they are still stuck in the private sphere. Thus, communist policies first needed to help integrate women into the public sphere (e.g. workplace; politics). Just like the feminist waves, to be able to reach difference feminism or

even radical feminism, where we break down the patriarchy, it was first necessary to pass through liberal feminism.

Returning to the issue of gender equality not being the primary goal of the RCP, it is unquestionable that women's autonomy should be seen as an end in itself; as the reason behind feminists' collective actions (Miroiu, 2007). Nonetheless, one cannot argue that using women's rights as a means to benefit the state would preclude their enjoyment of the obtained rights. Even if the end goal of communism was not gender equality, instead using it as a means to legitimise their regime and to increase their workforce, this does not outweigh the real outcomes that were seen. There was a significant, noticeable improvement in women's rights even when making comparisons to Western countries. The practical changes have oft been mentioned by authors throughout this paper, making references to progressive laws and policies such as:

- Equality before the law;
- Equal pay for equal work;
- Outlawing gender-based discrimination;
- Laws protecting mothers;
- Childcare facilities.

While it is true that the implementation of some of these was lacking, it is important to reiterate that one cannot write off the real advances that were made. It is known that women's participation rates in the workforce but also politics were higher than those of women in the West (Ghebrea, 2015). This pattern was also seen in higher education as women represented the majority of students in all communist countries by the early 1980s (Harsch, 2013). These outcomes can be seen as feminist in effect, regardless of their primary intention. While the state's motivation may not have been explicitly feminist, the significant improvements made in

women's lives - such as a higher level of educated women and working women; and access to childcare services - still align with feminist goals. In other words, even if the Party may have seen gender policies as necessary in achieving rapid economic growth and modernisation, this does not take away from women fulfilling their gender interests. Communism was self-serving, but it also benefited women.

Even having argued that one cannot overlook the progress made during communism just because it was in its incipient stages, it is crucial to state that the policies of communism already stretched beyond the accused formal equality in some areas. For example, the aforementioned articles 151, 152, and 154 to 158 of the 1972 Labour Code were enacted to protect the specific needs of mothers and pregnant women. In other areas, however, the equality remained more formal than substantive. For instance, while there was equal pay for equal work, labour was highly gendered and women occupied the lower-paid positions.

Gherbea (2015) also states that in communist states women saw the participation in economic and socio-political activities as a burden. While women may have been hoping for a lower retirement age, the interviews conducted by Massino (2009) show that some of them felt intellectually, personally and creatively fulfilled and appreciated the regular income. Some even felt liberated by this work, especially since it put them on an equal par with men and facilitated the renegotiation of domestic duties.

Persistent Patriarchal Norms:

Due to the policies favouring formal equality between men and women, Ghebrea (2015) argues that they did not profoundly alter the structural mechanisms which maintain gender inequalities. For instance, the assimilation of women into the workforce had a significant negative impact on women - the 'double burden' caused by the norms which rendered women

the caretakers while still needing to hold a job. The author also explains that the communist regime failed to enter the private sphere, allowing patriarchal norms to persist within it. It has also come to light that despite 'equal pay for equal work' policies, the workforce was still gendered, with women occupying lower-paid jobs. While I fully agree that this is a valid criticism and another weak point of the communist approach, it is not completely true that all gender norms remained the same. As already mentioned, Massino (2009) showed evidence of how women's entrance into the workforce opened up a whole new world for them and provided some of them with enough independence to demand more help from their partners with domestic duties. Moreover, the regime tried to redistribute duties in the private sphere and incentivise men to take up more responsibilities; additionally, they tried to create socialised locations that outsourced the work such as childcare facilities. It is true, however, that women's roles remained that of a mother and caregiver - especially once Ceausescu implemented pronatalist policies and propaganda. Communism did not succeed in removing this burden from women. Ghebrea (2015) also discusses its negligence regarding domestic violence and abuse.

Eliminating the patriarchy is paramount to radical and socialist feminism, with both seeing patriarchal structures and attitudes as a root cause of women's oppression. Radical feminists fight for "the end of patriarchy's gender system, not merely expanding women's choices within patriarchy" (Jensen, 2021, p.4). Similarly, social feminists see the fall of the patriarchy - along with the overthrow of capitalism - as essential to ending women's subordination. Consequently, both branches of feminism would likely deem the gender policies of communism as insufficient.

That being said, the failure of socialism to completely empower women does not imply that its policies were not feminist'. These policies facilitated significant advancement towards

the liberation of women, including in the four areas introduced in the theoretical framework: production; reproduction; sex; and the socialisation of children. Women were integrated into the workforce, and efforts were made to reduce the ‘double burden’ by providing socialised childcare facilities. Nevertheless, the reproductive sphere can be seen as lacking in Romania due to Ceausescu’s ban on abortions in 1966. Additionally, while propaganda depicted women as strong, qualified workers (and mothers), public opinion showed persisting attitudes regarding women’s role as caregivers and men’s role as leaders. This demonstrates a partial failure to reorganise gender norms and domestic divisions of labour. These attitudes continue to be seen in Romania nowadays (despite generally decreasing in intensity), where the majority still view women as responsible for domestic duties (e.g. food preparation, home cleaning) and men as the family heads. As previously shown, men are still perceived to be the leaders, with 46.9 percent of people preferring a male president, while only 9.4 percent prefer a female president.

Given that Romania continues to struggle with breaking free of patriarchal gender norms, does this mean that there has never been feminism in Romania? Are none of the current women-friendly gender policies feminist? This seems like a challenging argument to make. As previously explained, ‘feminism’ was a highly stigmatised term in socialist states, leading to their reluctance to adopt the label. It was perceived as a hypocritical movement defending only the rights of bourgeois women. Nevertheless, one should acknowledge that the socialist policies of communist Romania were pro-women and woman-friendly - in other words, ‘feminist’. In reference to the socialist stigma against the term ‘feminism’, Daskalova (2007) writes that:

> *It seems to me that after 1989 'socialism' and 'feminism' have changed places and now the stigma has transferred to all undertakings of the former socialist states: no matter how 'pro-women' or ‘women friendly'. Therefore, when we do not pay enough attention to*

the historical complexity of social reality, we may be overseeing some important lessons of history (Daskalova, 2007, p.218).

Along the same train of thought, Daskalova (2007) critiqued Miroiu's arguments for implying that there is/was an ideal place, where women's autonomy has been achieved and the patriarchy eliminated. The author explains that states are not neutral and, even Western democratic welfare states are patriarchies. She also explains that Eastern states were not free of patriarchal norms before communism either, yet we cannot deny historical feminisms.

Moreover, Lukić is one of many to argue that although full equality was not achieved, the general trend of communist countries towards this goal profoundly benefitted women and empowered them (Haan et al., 2016). Donert (2017) reaches the same conclusion, stating that despite falling short of achieving gender equality, socialist states in the Eastern bloc promoted and advanced women's educational and employment opportunities; provided socialised childcare services and maternal leave; and offered (relatively easy) access to contraceptives and abortion[20]. They created a new form of women's citizenship. These were often ahead of Western feminist demands (Donert, 2017).

All of this being said, it is important to concede and highlight the sometimes contradictory nature of communist policies (e.g. structural barriers which limited women to lower-paid occupations; unsolved double-burden despite childcare facilities) which worked to limit the advancement of women's equality with men. While the gender policies during communism significantly advanced women's rights, the self-interested nature of the Communist Party prevented more progress from being achieved. The critique provided by Miroiu (2007) is

[20] With the exception of Romania after Decree 770 of 1966 sanctioned by Ceausescu.

valid and well-stated regarding the lack of freedom and full autonomy under the repressive nature of the state, as well as their instrumental use of women's roles.

The lagging of women's emancipation post-communism

Shortcomings of State Feminism in Communism

The mentioned shortcomings regarding the limited progress against patriarchal norms; the instrumentalisation of women; and the limited agency and autonomy of the RNCW were useful in demonstrating that communist gender policies were still 'feminist', but these factors are also essential in understanding the lag in the emancipation of women after the 1989 Revolution. For example, previous sections have demonstrated that the transition period saw a significant decrease in the political representation of women, with it continuing to be low even today. There was also data presented proving a lower presence of women in decision-making positions, as well as a lower percentage of working women (57.4%) than men (75%).

The public's patriarchal attitudes in regard to the private sphere seem to be more enduring in comparison to those about the public sphere. The authors of the aforementioned Gender Barometer refer to "the existence of fixed themes, frozen in time in an area of conservative approaches, but also a visible change towards more modern attitudes on a number of other aspects" (Grünberg et al., 2018, p.13). Within this, they refer to topics on which the public has changed their opinion between the surveys carried out in 2000 and 2018. For example, the belief that household chores are the responsibilities of women has remained fairly constant, decreasing only by 5 percent from the 63 percent recorded in 2000. Additionally, the notion that "food preparation, home cleaning, washing of clothes and dishes, ironing of laundry are activities performed by women only, and home repairs are men's apprenticeship" has remained fairly

constant around the 80 percent mark (Grünberg et al., 2018, p.13). Other topics have seen a significant shift in attitudes, the amount of people that preferred having a male president fell from 73 percent in 2000 to 46.9 percent in 2018. Additionally, fewer people now believe that "women are too busy with household affairs and have no time for leadership" than they previously did - decreasing from 68 percent in 2000 to 44 percent in 2018 - and fewer believe that "it is more of a male duty than a female duty to be the breadwinners" - decreasing from 70 percent in 2000 to 61 percent in 2018 (Grünberg et al., 2018, p.14). Additionally, table 3 showed that only a minority of people perceive education as being more important for men.

The collected information and statistics regarding the private sphere paint a grim story. Abortions on demand are difficult to obtain, with widely fluctuating prices. Many hospitals refuse to offer this service and even those that officially allow it decline the procedure when approached. The grounds involved are mostly based on religion and the belief that a doctor must not do harm (by killing a fetus). Thus, women continue to have unsafe abortions even today due to the difficulty of obtaining one in medical institutions. The church, as well as anti-choice NGOs further complicate processes and sway the public opinion in regards not only to abortions but to sexual education in schools. Domestic violence also continues to be common in Romania, with a quarter of women having been assaulted at least once by their partner. In addition to the above-mentioned public beliefs regarding women's domestic duties, it becomes clear that women face many risks and problems in the private sphere. In short, it seems that while women's presence in the public sphere is fairly well accepted, and more people are perceiving them as respectable candidates for leadership positions, the patriarchal attitudes in the private sphere are more incessant.

Interestingly, the criticisms this paper has presented regarding communism's failure to protect women in the private sphere continue to hold relevance today. It appears that public opinions in areas where women excelled during the communist era are significantly more progressive compared to attitudes towards domains that communism also struggled (or refused to) reform. This suggests that the shortcomings of communism in achieving gender equality and breaking free of patriarchal attitudes and structures in the private sphere have had lasting impacts, persisting even after the regime's collapse. The conservative and progressive views of communist Romania are still reflected in contemporary society. While the overall situation has undoubtedly improved since then, it is noteworthy that the proportions and specific areas where Romania demonstrates progress remain similar to those of the past.

Another possible explanation for the stagnation is provided by Băluţă (2015) in an article titled "(Re)Constructing democracy without women. Gender and politics in post-communist Romania". Within it, she explains that the regression in women's political representation may be connected to the communist legacy. While women's access to education and the workforce remains accepted by the public, the concept of 'gender equality' has been besmirched by the embrace of egalitarian rhetoric by the Communist Party. The people had come to associate the inclusion of women in public spheres and gender equality with communist ideology. Consequently, in the transition period, after 1989, Romanians wanted to distance themselves from memories of the repressive and violent regime as much as possible, which resulted in a delegitimisation of any proposed measures aimed at increasing women's representation in Parliament. For example, measures regarding the implementation of gender quotas in political parties led to fervent opposition, with two examples being seen in the following quotes:

> *This exaggerated communism, promoting women, does us no good. Are we to believe that women are handicapped?* (quote by Mădălin Voicu, PSD deputy, as cited in Băluţă & Rothstein, 2015, p.180)

> *Political parity is a paradoxical concept […]. On the other hand, mechanically imposed parity has a Marxist, totalitarian connotation that makes me uncomfortable. […] I reject this feminist-Marxist enthusiasm which transfers class warfare to warfare between genders or sexes.* (quote by Teodor Baconschi, Foreign Minister at the time, as cited in Băluţă & Rothstein, 2015, p.180)

The result is that the concept of 'gender equality', which communism failed to fully achieve, became even less attainable.

Rhetoric versus Reality

When evaluating the stagnation of women's emancipation after 1989, it is essential to consider the dichotomy between the rhetoric of communist policies and their reality. Despite the progressive language and the promises of gender equality, it has already become clear that the implementation and enforcement on the ground were often inadequate. This section reflects on the various aspects of women's lives under communism, exploring the gaps between official rhetoric and women's lived experiences by making use of the information documented in this paper so far. The limitations of progressive policies under state control reveal that goals were often driven by the party's self-interest rather than genuine commitment to women's emancipation, which left much to be desired in terms of gender equality. This failure of the Party to make due on their promises may suggest a lower level of gender equality than anticipated,

which would help explain the apparent stagnation (and even reversal) of women's emancipation in the transition period.

The right to education

As previously shown, the communist regime made extraordinary improvements in the field of education. Thousands of new educational institutions were built and students enrolled, with the literacy rate climbing as high as 90 percent. That being said, the 'eradication' of teaching staff not loyal to the party, alongside a curriculum constructed to mirror communist ideology do smudge these achievements.

The right to work

As discussed in the theoretical framework, communism brought women of all social statuses into the workforce, providing a guaranteed workplace. In addition, equal remuneration was guaranteed with laws against discrimination based on sex. There were also multiple articles enacted in the Labour's Code and the Constitution to protect women's specific needs (mainly in relation to their role as mothers). On the other side, the division of labour was highly gendered, with women aggregating in lower-paid jobs and seldom being found in decision-making positions. This was not only a result of the biased assignment of women to specific jobs based on gender norms, but also due to women's lack of time and energy caused by their domestic duties (and the triple-burden: work; family; politics). The insufficient social services (such as overwhelmed childcare services) failed to eradicate the extra burdens on women's lives. Consequently, although equal pay for men and women was mandated, women generally earned less due to the nature of their jobs (Massino & Penn, 2009). As a side note, this struggle is mirrored in capitalist societies, where male-dominated fields continue to earn higher salaries.

These realities precluded socialist women from attaining economic equality with men (Harsch, 2013). Women's continued economic dependence on men impedes their ability to fight patriarchal norms and demand a redistribution of domestic duties due to lower bargaining power.

The political realm

The transition period of Romania, transforming from a dictatorship into a democracy, led to the collapse of women's political representation. Băluță (2015, p.176) explains that "after the fall of the communist regime, the autonomy of parties and political institutions was restored… but without women". The data collected throughout this paper has shown that women's presence in the Parliament fell from 35 percent to less than 5 percent. Referring back to Pitkin's framwork, this could be seen as a lack of substantive representation during communism. It is true that women were represented in a descriptive manner (they shared the same gender with their representatives), but the elected women's actions were not necessarily in favour of women's needs and interests (Băluță & Tufiș, 2021). Instead of promoting a feminist agenda, these often favoured the interests of the Party. This view is also seen in Băluță (2015)'s earlier work, where she argued that the high amount of women in communist political institutions did not (generally) translate to them being part of the networks and structures of political power. Additionally, their presence in the real center of power - the Communist Party - was relatively low, especially at the top of the hierarchy. Nevertheless, Băluță (2015) explains that even if the political institutions of a totalitarian regime and a democratic one are incomparable, one cannot ignore the extreme extent with which women were marginalised in the political realm post-commmunism.

Another point of argument concerns the double burden of communist women, which impeded their participation in the political realm. Since women had a waged job and (often) a second job (consisting of domestic duties), they had less available time in comparison to men to

engage in political activities or develop a political career. Adding onto these unfavourable conditions for women was the nature of dispensing patronage and opportunities. Men created their own networks, where they would recommend fellow men for promotions (Harsch, 2013). As a side note, this gendered patronage system in the political arena is another reason why women were heavily represented in other work sectors such as education, public health and retail trade - it was easier to be promoted and advance in these fields (Harsch, 2013). The gender policies implemented during communist times were insufficient in dismantling such patriarchal tendencies hiding multiple layers of discrimination.

Public opinion of women

The social representations of women and their roles, responsibilities and traits significantly impact the behaviour of both women and men. Gender stereotypes that have been ingrained since girlhood can make women hesitant to enter politics; make them feel less prepared or less able to carry out the tasks that men do. Meanwhile, society has made people associate leadership qualities with men, making the electorate place more faith in male candidates due to these internalised values. Every single step - ranging from the decision to enter politics, to running for candidacy, to being elected - is heavily influenced by societal gender contracts. These affect the choices of the representatives and those of the represented (Băluță & Tufiș, 2021). Gender contracts can be understood as the:

> *[...] set of implicit and explicit rules governing gender relations which allocate different work and value, responsibilities and obligations to men and women and [are] maintained on three levels: cultural superstructure: the norms and values of society; institutions —*

> *family welfare, education and employment systems, etc.; and socialisation processes, notably in the family.* (European Commission, 1998, p.26)

Therefore, not only is there a 'glass ceiling' preventing women from advancing in their profession but there is also a 'sticky floor', where societies with traditional gender values discourage women (directly or through gender norms) from participating in politics. While the transition to a democracy may have altered existing institutions, the cultural superstructure is more durable. Many of those who argue for the inclusion of women in politics do so based on their role as mothers, with Lucia Varga (former liberal deputy and former president of the Women's Organisation of the Liberal Party) having stated that "Women can have an important voice in policies relating to the family, thanks to their role in supporting the family" (as cited in Băluță, 2015, p.181). In fact, Băluță's (2015) analysis of 150 articles revealed that most journalists, analysts and politicians continue to view women's first duty as mothers and as protectors of the family's harmony.

It becomes clear that the gender contracts governing the post-1989 Romanian society are marked by conservative attitudes, with a "revalorization of religion, reaffirmation of family values, and of traditional sex roles" (Băluță, 2015, p.181). As previously stated, it appears that the shortcomings of communism in achieving gender equality and breaking free of patriarchal attitudes and structures have had lasting impacts, persisting even after the regime's collapse. The communist propaganda that displayed women as mothers, caretakers and workers, with those in positions of power and in politics being exceptions. This further reinforced beliefs that women cannot exist in other realms - such as the political one. After 1989, most women were not used or welcomed to entering 'men's spaces' and striving for leadership positions outside of what communism had permitted. Thus, one factor slowing progress down was the deeply rooted

gender norms that persisted after the overthrow of the regime. The resurgence of the Orthodox Church, after a period of repression under Ceausescu's rule, has contributed to the reinforcement and intensification of conservative views, evident in its public opposition to sexual education in schools and same-sex unions.

Women's equality as a means to an end

As discussed, gender equality under the Communist Party was used as a means to an end. The Party's final goal was not the emancipation of women but rather: 1) to legitimise the Party's superiority and progressiveness; 2) to divert attention from the regime's repressive and violent characteristics; and 3) to have a larger workforce for higher production rates. Consequently, Gârboni (2014, p.250) identifies another reason for the regression in women's representation in politics after the revolution, explaining that:

> *During [the] Romanian transition, gender equality was not one of the top priorities. An explanation for the ignorance of such an important theme could be the futility of such legislation during the previous regime.*

In other words, the Communist Party's lack of genuine concern for gender equality beyond their self-interests resulted in a continued indifference towards women's emancipation after the fall of the regime. This explanation may seem to counter Băluţă (2015)'s prior argument regarding the besmirchment of gender equality due to its perceived association with communist ideology. However, both theories can co-exist. A portion of the population may have felt indifferent towards gender equality, while others were strongly against it due to traumatic memories of communism.

Hurubean (2015) offers a similar perspective to Gârboni, elucidating that the promotion of gender equality in post-communist Romania replicates the formalism (as opposed to substantive change) from the previous regime. Even in democratic Romania, policies enacted in the name of gender equality perpetuate the inequalities embedded in the male-patriarchal society. The deeply ingrained cultural norms continue to influence the laws, regulations and established institutions. Consequently, any created programs or policies will not achieve lasting impact as long as the prevailing cultural models and socialisation mechanisms continue to uphold a gender hierarchy.

More than just rhetoric

Molyneaux (2016, pp.100-101) argues that women's progress during communism went beyond mere rhetoric. She argues that:

> *"communist parties presided over some of the most dramatic and widespread attempts at social change in modern times. [...] communist parties worldwide embarked on an ambitious and comprehensive programme of social reform with the proclaimed goal of eradicating social inequality and injustice. [...] As a result of the policies adopted by communist states, women's socio-economic position was radically transformed: under Communist Party rule women acquired new rights and obligations; they entered the public realm in substantial numbers, as workers and political actors; they attained similar, if not superior, levels of education to men; and the family was modernised and placed on a foundation of legal equality between the sexes. On any conventional definition of progress, let alone one based on feminist criteria, as far as the situation of women was concerned, the communist states merit some recognition."*

Molyneaux (2016)'s views is complementary to that of this paper. Despite the flaws that have been discussed at length here, she highlights the remarkable and extraordinary changes made during communism. Women were brought on par with men in some ways (e.g. workforce) and progress was made in other domains (e.g. political realm). One cannot claim that these advancements, far outpacing those of Western countries were simply rhetoric made to help the Party. While true equality between the genders was not achieved, women's social position was vastly improved (Harsch, 2013). Donert (2017) corroborates these claims by demonstrating that the paternalistic social policies adopted during communism aided in shaping new forms of citizenship and personal identity for women. In short, scholars show that there was real change for women - insufficient, but real.

Non-linear progress

It has been shown countless times throughout this paper that the transition period post-1989 led to stagnation - and even regression at times - in women's emancipation. In fact, "women experienced the collapse of state socialism in 1989-91 as a loss of social rights as well as an era of tantalizing new freedoms" (Donert, 2017, p.399). Lukić laments this process, questioning why it was necessary to abolish women's hard-earned rights, just so that they would have to fight for them again. Earlier in her article she mentions the deceptive assumption that the progress achieved and the rights secured during communism were permanent (e.g. equal pay, abortion rights, socialised childcare) (Haan et al., 2016). She later talks of Papić (2006, p.122)'s article, which asserts that "the patriarchal recolonization of women's bodies was central to post-communist processes of 'democratic' transformations", referring to the strategic violation of women's human rights that had been previously established. In this way, post-communist men gained dominant political and economic control over women, creating 'male democracies' and

‘new patriarchies’. Lukić goes on to explain that although the political landscape has since evolved, significant issues persist. To underscore her argument, she points to the continued debates against abortion, the rise of homophobia, xenophobia and far-right discourse (Haan et al., 2016). This statement is all the more convincing when considering the 2024 European Parliament elections where the power of far-right parties continues to rise and has even won in multiple countries. While Romania is led by a centre-left party, other countries such as Poland, Hungary and Latvia have seen significant victories for right-wing parties. This trend towards right and far-right parties can be seen in most of Europe (including Germany and France) (European Parliament, 2024).

EU membership

As briefly touched upon at times in this paper, Romania’s accession to the European Union was a crucial factor in generating legislative changes. The country was required to comply with the Copenhagen Criteria and thus adopt the Acquis Communautaire (the existing body of EU law). Gârboni (2014) states that most legislation aiming at the advancement of women’s rights and gender equity was adopted under pressures from the EU, which proved more effective than efforts by Romanian NGOs. Major legislative achievements included the Parental Leave Law, and the Law for the Prevention and Control of Violence in the Family. Two important agencies were also created, namely the National Council for the Prevention and Control of All Forms of Discrimination and the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men. Interestingly, since Romania's accession to the EU, the percentage of women in the European Parliament has consistently been higher than in the National Parliament (Gârboni, 2014). This trend could be indicative of Romania’s efforts to align with EU norms regarding gender equality.

Since the efforts of Romania to join the EU led to major legislative and policy changes, the timing of its accession could be considered a factor in its relatively slower progress in women's rights in comparison to Western European countries. The latter had more time to establish and refine their gender equality policies, while Romania was still emerging and shaking off the effects of the totalitarian communist regime (thus facing additional challenges in aligning with the EU's standards). Băluță and Tufiș (2021)'s article provides evidence for this, explaining that there was an upward trend in the representation of women in politics after the accession of Romania to the EU. The public's opinion seems to somewhat align with this, with 57.9 percent of Romanians agreeing that the EU has positively influenced the equal opportunities available to both men and women (Grünberg, Rusu, Samoilă, 2019).

Conversely, other scholars see the legislative changes after Romania's accession to the EU as superficial. Miroiu (2007, p.200) persuasively explains that "the patriarch can change his masks", and the fall of the patriarch present during communism (i.e. the state) was simply replaced by a new, covert one. The author uses the term 'room-service feminism' to describe how Eastern European countries passively implement gender equality measures dictated by the EU, aking to room service in a hotel, instead of developing them organically. This results in a superficial compliance driven by normative obligations rather than by genuine commitment. This 'room-service feminism' is another explanation for the stagnation in women's progress and the failure to eliminate ingrained patriarchal structures. In line with this argument, Băluţă (2015, p.182) writes that "the participation of women in political decision-making is no more than a fine phrase to use in projects and strategies to be "sold" to the European Union." This line of reasoning is in agreement with Hurubean (2015)'s argument that any created programs or

policies - including at the EU level - will not achieve lasting impact as long as the prevailing cultural norms continue to uphold a gender hierarchy.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that understanding gender equality in past and contemporary Romania requires a multifaceted analysis of numerous factors.

To start, the progressive nature of communist women-friendly policies was assessed. It was shown that socialist states in the Eastern bloc made crucial strides by: promoting and advancing equal educational and employment opportunities; providing socialised childcare services and extended maternity leave; offering access to contraceptives and abortion; liberalising divorce; and ensuring women had equal rights to men under the law. These were often ahead of Western feminist demands and strongly influenced global feminist movements (Donert, 2017; Harsch, 2013). In fact, Donert (2017, p.399) adds that “many of the demands of Western feminist movements after 1968 were already taken for granted by women living in socialist states”.

However, it is crucial to peer behind the curtain of these seemingly progressive policies - which claimed to have solved the ‘woman question’ - to uncover hidden problems and criticisms. Despite facing significant criticism from Western feminists, it was evident that socialist countries did share some similar values with feminist ideologies, albeit under different terminology. The term "feminism" carried a negative connotation in the Eastern bloc, often seen as a tool for aiding bourgeois women while neglecting the working class. In addition to this, ‘feminism’ evoked memories of Western imperialism and of cultural domination.

Given these divergent views on feminism, the paper introduced multiple branches of feminist theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of the term. This theoretical

framework set the stage for an in-depth examination of women's experiences in (post-)communist Romania.

Women in communist Romania experienced a mix of advancements and setbacks. Notably, in education and employment, there were significant gains, with huge increases in literacy rates; school enrolment; as well as employment rates. Nevertheless, these were accompanied by a "double burden" (or even triple) due to inadequate social measures to support working women. The working day was too short to carry out all the responsibilities assigned to women and the ‘superwoman’ displayed in propaganda became seen as an insult. In fact, most likely due to knowing the unrealistic expectations they held, *Femeia* magazine chose to never portray Romanian women as ‘workers’ and ‘mothers’ concomitantly. That being said limitations were also found in the labour realm, where - despite equal remuneration -, women received lower wages due to the gendered division of labour. Politically, women were ostensibly included, but they could rarely be found in decision-making positions.. Legal protections existed, but these were poorly implemented. Additionally, reproductive rights were severely restricted, with childbirth becoming a state matter. Issues such as domestic violence and civil society involvement painted a bleak picture, although the Romanian National Council of Women was an institution that was seen opposing the regime to support women’s right to abortion.

Post-communism, the situation evolved differently across various domains. Politically, women's representation plummeted, never again reaching the same quantities as during communism. While one cannot compare a totalitarian system with a democratic one, the lack of women’s political representation is a real concern. The labour realm saw mixed changes - despite an impressive reduction in the gender gap, women’s employment rates decreased and they continued being burdened by most domestic duties. Unfortunately, patriarchal attitudes persisted

in the public's opinion, although there does seem to be a shift towards more progressive views. That being said, Grünberg (et al., 2018, p.5) argues that "in this regional context hostile to gender equality, Romania is facing a rhetoric of anti-gender equality [and] the demonetization of the gender theme". Lastly, issues surrounding domestic violence continued; as well as a real difficulty in obtaining an abortion on demand (despite its liberalisation).

Interestingly, the Gender Barometer found that 62 percent of respondents believe that "society has reached the point where women and men have equal chances of success" (Grünberg et al., 2018, p.17). Unsurprisingly, men were slightly more likely to hold this belief, with 65.7 percent in agreement in comparison to only 60.3 percent of women (Grünberg, Rusu, Samoilă, 2019). Such high numbers may mean that Romanians see a significant change from the past, where women have access to a lot more opportunities. This progress however, while real, is much slower than one may believe, with Romania being placed on the last place in the European Union according to the Gender Equality Index.

There is also a prevailing sense of pessimism among Romanians surrounding the current state and the future that awaits their country. According to Grünberg, Rusu and Samoilă (2019), 72.8 percent of women and 73.4 percent of men believe that Romania is heading in the wrong direction. It is unclear, however, if this discontent indicates frustration with the slow pace of progress over the years or if, instead, this is representative of those who view the current trajectory as too liberal, conflicting with traditionalist values. Supporting the latter perspective, 31.7 percent of Romanians feel that there have been too many discussions about the treatment of women in the past few years (Grünberg, Rusu, Samoilă, 2019). The lack of optimism in Romania is likely caused by a mixture of different frustrations.

The discussion began by exploring the concept of State Feminism, explaining that this Western theory must be adapted to analyse the Eastern Bloc. It was argued that the women-friendly policies of communist Romania could be understood as a form of State Feminism, albeit partial. Communism in Romania was deeply flawed, failing to achieve many of its aims and using women as a tool to further its goals. However, its impact on the public sphere cannot be overlooked. The regime's policies brought about significant advancements in women's rights, which, despite their imperfections, were progressive for the time. One cannot retrospectively classify the communist women-friendly policies as non-feminist using contemporary forms of feminism that are not contextualised. Communism was self-serving, but it benefited women. Lastly, several factors are considered as contributors to the stagnation of women's emancipation.

Given the extensive factors influencing gender equality in Romania, much remains for further exploration. Future studies should adopt an intersectional approach, examining how the communist regime and contemporary Romania addressed or failed to address the needs of various discriminated groups, such as Roma women, queer women, and women from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The experiences of women in rural versus urban settings also warrant further investigation.

Moreover, research should compare communist countries to determine if Romania was an exception or if similar stagnations in women's emancipation occurred elsewhere. Considering Ceausescu's particularly strict abortion policies, there may be significant differences worth exploring.

Other points of exploration have been mentioned throughout the paper and include: the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in the regression of women's political representation in 2020;

the effect of growing up or living during communism on people's current gender beliefs - this would demonstrate if contemporary patriarchal attitudes mainly persist in those influenced by communist propaganda, or whether they are more innate to the whole country.

In conclusion, this paper underscores the complexity of gender equality in Romania's historical and contemporary contexts, highlighting the importance of moving beyond Western conceptions of feminism. While communism brought about notable advancements for women, it also perpetuated significant challenges. Understanding this duality is crucial for addressing current gender inequalities and paving the way for a more equitable future.

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