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SCHOLAR RESEARCH BRIEF:

The Everyday Experience of Women's Emancipation in the U.S. and Romania in the Twentieth Century and Beyond: A Transnational Study

The project built an archive for transnational comparative thinking about women's rights and women's lives over the last three generations in the United States and Romania. Questions central to the 54 oral history interviews done this summer are "what does political gender equality mean," and especially how does it connect with the everyday lives of women who come from different social categories—educationally, generationally, economically, religiously, politically, and other relevant groupings. In the three weeks spent in Romania I oversaw and conducted three focus groups (all filmed) with women ages 35-86 and from both urban and rural settings, as well as follow up interviews (a few filmed, most audio taped) with 54 of them.

RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

The history of women's rights in Romania is dramatically different than that of women in the United States. After World War II, the Romanian feminist movement was completely wiped out by the communist regime. Social improvements, such as increased economic power, education, and property rights, were handed to women with important costs, such as the ability to articulate an internally critical feminist discourse inside the Communist Party.

The changes that took place in the aftermath of the fall of communism have had specific gendered qualities predicated upon these communist traditions. Neo-liberalism, democratic pluralism, and the market economy have all been gender inflected processes and ideologies, yet gender analysis has not been at the heart of mainstream narratives about the political, economic, and social transformations in the past two decades in Eastern Europe. After 1989, feminists had to develop a specific agenda taking into account both the consequence of the former communist regime (that did not allow for women experience to be brought on the political agenda) and the increase of the democratization process due to the integration in the European Union that provided the base for the development of a "room-service political feminism" (Miroiu, 2004).

This study offers the possibility for reframing 'transition' both in a longer-term narrative of social

*The study focused in part on the lives of women
in the village of Sancai, Hunedoara*



and cultural transformations along the twentieth century, as well as in a comparative framework in which what politics and ideology mean at the grassroots local level is made centrally relevant for understanding macro-processes of a transnational nature.

RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

The research design was based on qualitative analysis. A meta-analysis of previously unpublished existing quantitative data collected in 2007 through the project *Gender, Political Interests and European Insertion*, will enable us to establish how personal assessments by subjects of their social and economic status, power relations within the family, political awareness, personal values, and public traditions (public narratives) interplay with factors such as level of education or (lack of) career paths for women. Data collection followed three methods: semi structured interviews (through focus groups), oral histories, and ethnographic observation. We used three semi-structured interviews to construct narratives that allowed subsequently for a relational-based research. Factors such as power relations within the family, gender roles assumed by women and their partners or extended family, as well as one's own perceived social roles and cultural traditions (public narratives) illuminated how power relations promote or disadvantage gender empowerment. We did three such focus groups, each of them with a group of eight women, lasting between two and four hours.

The longer individual interviews focused on the relationship between town and country, education and economic empowerment, as well as the links and divisions among women of different backgrounds in forming alliances to advance women's issues. We followed the relationship between locally based forms of community activism—educational, religious, broadly cultural, and political—on the one hand, and the gendering of women's narratives about self-fulfillment and self-

empowerment, and political representation on the other hand. Ultimately, what I am attempting to trace is a different type of narrative of social growth and the frustrations that are part of that story, making gender attributes of what it means to participate, what it means to be shunned, and what it means to be counted, centrally relevant to our understanding of everyday life and the fabric of society from the twentieth century and until the present.

Central to conceptualizing these interviews and my own analytical interests (I think the interviews will be a useful archive for scholars with other agendas as well, starting with my collaborator in the research project, Mihaela Miroiu) is the notion that citizenship is a type of social self-identification embodied and performed in essential gendered ways, both in the political arena and more broadly in society. Political concepts, such as 'enfranchisement,' come to have specific value both in a macro sense of providing a specific shape and size of the electorate and also, more importantly for me, at local level, where most people situate their choices of how to live out political rights such as voting. Thus, performing citizenship means far



Eva, one of the subjects, worked in the 1960s to encourage extracurricular activities among her pupils in the village where she was assigned to teach.

more than going to the ballot box or taking part in elections. It also means offering oneself as a model for involvement in decision-making in the life of a community from local parent-teacher networks in schools to informal neighborhood associations, and one's place of worship. Citizenship is as much a construction of one's social self as it is performing specific acts in the community.

The interviews, 54 in all, covered a wide range of ages, 35-86, and of personal and educational backgrounds, as well as religious and ethnic identities. We were able to find Romanian, Hungarian, and German interlocutors, some who were of mixed ethnic background, as well as persons who self identified as Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and non-religious. There is no significant Jewish community in the area, so we were unable to offer any coverage of that variable, and we did not make successful inroads among the Romani population, though that goal remains important for the longer (120 interviews in total) project.

The interviews were between one and three hours long, and followed a loose life history model, and varied a great deal in terms of the content narrated by the interviewees. Some important patterns emerged, however, in their narratives.

To begin with, as very much predicted, women of all ages and educational backgrounds identify very strongly with their familial context, with decision making in the home, and very much as part of their familial, i.e., non-public lives. They indicated overall

that they made some of the most important decisions in that realm, but tended not to connect them directly to the realm of the politics. Another trend was to indicate that they very much treasured economic autonomy and, even when they indicated they were not the primary breadwinner, they spoke strongly in favor of having an active, independent, professional/employment life. Finally, almost no women found themselves represented in the public sphere by the current or any past political organizations and politicians. There is a presidential campaign coming up soon in Romania, and overall women indicated that they did not trust any of the candidates, nor did they feel the obligation or desire to vote in the upcoming elections.

“Our generation knew how to work, we grew up in the countryside working the land...today the youth do not have a sense of responsibility, they just want things.” Mrs. Albu, economist, retired.

CONTINUING RESEARCH

The project I began last summer will have a natural continuation in the coming year. I am working with the two assistants to transcribe the interviews and enlarge the circle of potential interviewees, with a focus on the rural population and older women. By June 2010, I intend to have all 110 interviews finalized and most of them transcribed. I am working this academic year to analyze most of this data and begin writing a few analyses. The first step will be to identify some common themes (I am hoping about four-five) that run through these interviews, which will enable me to aggregate the responses in both a qualitative and quantitative manner. I intend to pursue these themes further by checking against other kinds of existing data, such as the surveys undertaken in the past years through the gender barometer projects of the past decade, as well as the nationwide *Gender, Political Interests and European Insertion* project coordinated by Mihaela Miroiu in 2007.

RELEVANCE TO POLICY COMMUNITY

One of the important remaining inadequacies among many international projects of democratization in post-authoritarian governments has been the inability to connect concepts such as 'rights', 'citizenship', 'democracy', and 'public good' to specific understandings and practices in the locales for which these projects are meant. This project goes to the heart of this matters, and aims to translate for academic, policy making, and wider audiences, how women in Romania coming from many educational, economic, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, have made sense of the larger political structures in which their lives have unfolded in the past few generations (going back as far as approximately 50 years). My goal is not to make specific policy recommendations, as much as provide tools for better understanding the likely interpretation of the goals of democratization and building civil society in the most immediate, everyday social, economic, and cultural practices of these potential recipients.

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