

# WOMEN'S EVERYDAY LIFE EXPERIENCE OF HOUSEWORK AND CARE. BETWEEN PARTENERSHIP NORMS AND PATRIARCHAL NORMALITY

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## Abstract.

*My aim in this paper is to explore the process by which women from a Transylvanian county understand family relations in their everyday life with respect to the sharing of the household and care responsibilities among members, mostly men and women. In doing so I will use the distinction made by Martin Hollis between a normal behavior - which can arise after some roles have been performed (the patriarchal gender roles inside the family), and the normative behavior - the one with a moral value (the partnership model of sharing responsibilities within the family). My approach will consist in the use of a gender sensitive constructivist framework, meaning that I will emphasize the way in which social actors give meaning to their interactions, keeping in mind at the same time that these interactions are developed in a coercive framework of institutions, norms, values and rules. I consider patriarchy to be one of the most important of these coercive structures, seen as a social system which perpetuates the male dominance over women in social organization, and in which fathers hold authority over women, children, and property within the family. The research design is based on a qualitative methodological triangulation. Data collection was focused on two methods: semi-structured interviews and focus groups of women from Hunedoara County, Romania, living in three towns and a village. The semi-structured interviews were used to construct narratives that allowed for a relational-based research. In this framework 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) will illuminate how power relations promote or disadvantage gender empowerment. The focus groups were made in order to establish fruitful and relevant lines of inquiry for the semi-structured interviews. I consider that one of the limitations of this research is the lack of a comparative framework between men's and women's understanding of the problem of household and care in Romania. The originality of this paper consists in providing new information and data about the underlined issue by using methods that try to give in-depth answers to how women see themselves as part of the family.*

**Keywords:** housework and care, constructivism, norms, power relations, public narratives

**Introduction.** In the beginning, I would like to specify the fact that this paper belongs to an extended study on women's citizenship in their everyday lives, namely my PhD thesis<sup>2</sup>. The main issues corresponding to housework and care have been in connection with the ones regarding participation (civic, political, professional and/or familial). More precisely, citizenship has been first and foremost linked to participation, and the constructivist approach I have undertaken, and to which I will return at a later point, stresses the way in which the individuals, in their everyday interactions, provide meaning to the experiences and structures that shape their behavior. As such, within these interactions, the individuals evaluate their present situations and act upon these evaluations. With respect to their actual reality, the consequences of these evaluations as to their capacity as citizens become manifest in the *active* (apparent), respectively *passive* (latent)<sup>3</sup> participation or through civic

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<sup>2</sup> As stated, the present paper is part of my doctoral thesis entitled *Gender and Citizenship in Romania*, which was coordinated by Prof. Dr. Mihaela Miroiu and defended on September, 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011 within the S.N.S.P.A. Doctoral School in Bucharest. The paper stressed citizenship as practice, by operationalizing the concepts of participation (civic, political, familial, and professional) and the way in which they are signified in the everyday lives of the interviewed subjects.

<sup>3</sup> See Lester Milbrath, *Political Participation*, (Chicago: Rand McNally&Co, 1965); Hakan Johanson, Bjorn Hvinden, „What do we mean by active citizenship?“, in Hakan Johanson, Bjorn Hvinden, *Citizenship in Nordic*

and *political* participation. However, when we actually consider the everyday lives of women, another form of participation becomes notable, namely the familial one. This perspective originates especially with the feminist theories that criticize the public-private distinction, engendering the so called “patriarchal separation”<sup>4</sup> of the domestic sphere from all the others<sup>5</sup>. The social effects of these constructions amount to the phenomenon which the *2000 Gender Barometer*, as well as other studies<sup>6</sup>, very well emphasizes, namely that women continue to be responsible for most of the housework and care activities.

Moreover, the conclusions of my doctoral paper regarding the way in which women understand and provide meaning to their relation to the paid work, point out the fact that this form of participation is directly related to their need for autonomy and community integration. Furthermore, these women don’t see themselves as housewives, but as active persons, continuously active on the work-market. Given this permanent tension between the family and the professional life, my main question within this paper is: how do women understand and provide meaning to their everyday lives, with respect to the repartition of their house and care-work between the members of the family, i.e. men and women? More specifically, what type of explanations do women provide for the fact of assuming (voluntarily or not) the burden of the double shift workday.

**Approach.** With respect to the conceptual framework, my arguments essentially belong to the interpretative epistemological tradition, providing for a dynamic perspective on the social and cultural existence of the human being, i.e. one in which the agent and the structure are seen as interdependent<sup>7</sup>. This analysis will focus on the relationships and biunivocal influences between the agents (providing the roles with meanings) and the structures (especially the patriarchal one that basically imposes normality). The individuals are viewed as actors, as subjects capable of autonomous and responsible action, respectively of evolving, contesting and changing the structures depending on the meanings they ascribe upon them. A constructivist approach brings forth the individuals involved in the *meaningful* construction of the social reality; however this process is not isolated or independent of the exterior reality, that becomes stable, institutionalized and, ultimately, constraining.

The main structure brought into discussion in this paper - the patriarchal one - is defined by Lerner as being the display and institutionalization of male domination over the women and children in the family, as well as the extension of this domination over women in the society in general<sup>8</sup>. Another important aspect in the construction of my arguments is the one regarding the distinction that Martin Hollis makes between a *normal* behavior which can arise after some roles have been performed and the *normative* role, the one with the moral value. Hollis emphasizes the distinction between *normal* and *normative*, in the way that the requirements imposed by a role can achieve normative connotations as a result of the meanings actors can associate with these roles, but it does

*Welfare States. Dynamics of choice, duties and participation in a changing Europe*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 32 – 50.

<sup>4</sup> See Carol Pateman, *The Disorder of Women*, (California: Stansford University Press, 1989), 35 and Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspective*, (New York: Palgrave, 2003, Second Edition), 73; Susan B .Boyd, Challenging the Public and Private Divide: An Overview, in Susan B .Boyd (ed.), *Challenging the Public and Private Divide. Feminism, Law and Public Policy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1997), 4; Susan Moller Okin, Gender, the Public, and the Private, in Anne Phillips, ed. *Feminism and Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 119.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspective*, (New York: Palgrave, 2003, second edition), 119.

<sup>6</sup> See also Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspective*, (New York: Palgrave, 2003, second edition), 130 – 131.

<sup>7</sup> See Peter Berger; Thomas Luckmann, *Construirea socială a realității*, (Bucharest: Art, 2008); Searle J. (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality*, The Free Press, New York; Brent G. Wilson, “Reflection on Constructivism and Instructional Design”, in Charles L. Dills, Alexander J. Romiszowski ed. (1997) *Instructional Development Paradigms*, (New Jersey: Educational Technology Publication, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 239.

not mean that any normal or regulated behavior comes from normative expectations<sup>9</sup>. Thus, a behavior which can be defined as normal may not always be the normative one.

In addition to this theoretical framework, I assume a feminist approach of the subject matter, by virtue of the *liberating* potential of feminism deriving from its contestation and deconstruction of the gender differences as generating illegitimate differences with respect to a democratic society.

**Methodology.** In order to come in contact with the women's actual view and life experience, in addition to the theoretical framework and the previous studies, the facts have been examined *in situ*, in a complex process that, beyond the actual interviews, either individual, or in group, also involved actual terrain research, in order to become familiar with the environment in which the subjects generate meanings. With respect to the representativity and the selection of the subjects, considering the method – ethno methodological qualitative research – and the techniques involved – 96 semi-structured interviews and 3 focus-groups – I have resorted to the theoretical sampling (the subjects have been selected on theoretical grounds, in view of providing comparative data and testing the research questions)<sup>10</sup>. The criteria involved were: sex (women), age and residence environment (urban).

I have chosen exclusively women for these interviews precisely because they have been subjected to significant changes in the last 100 years, especially considering the experiences with the totalitarian communist regime and the transition. As such, women are, concomitantly, the “new comers” in the sphere of political, civic and economic action and the “great absents” with respect to the authority positions within the public (especially political) and also as subjects of the studies, reports and researches performed in Romania.

With respect to the age sampling criterion, it has been used in order to gain information from fully mature persons with respect to their gender experiences (labor division, gender roles, care, autonomy, dependence within family) and their professional participation. The interviews were performed on the 24 – 82 age interval and the focus-groups on the 35 – 82 age interval and this because they have been used for the stabilization of the values of the individual interviews being used mainly for the pretesting of the questions of the interview, but also for the completion of the information gathered and for the enhancement of their validity<sup>11</sup>. For this reason, the focus-groups have been performed previous to the interviews and they pointed out the need for a 24 -35 age category to be introduced in the analysis, that subsequently became actual part of the interviews. I have considered necessary to clear these aspects in the methodological section of this paper, as they were designed and performed in my doctoral research. However, I must mention the fact that the analysis in this paper is not focused on the differences generated by the age of the subjects and this because, considering our subject matter, this variable proved not to have an explicative value. More precisely, I have found no relevant variations arising from the age of the subjects, fact that only strengthens the perpetuations of the patriarchal norms and their resistance to change. Noteworthy is also the fact that we are not dealing here with a “representative” sample as it is understood in the quantitative studies, as this undertaking does not aim to be a statistical analysis.

The location of the terrain study was Hunedoara county, more precisely the cities of Hunedoara, Deva and Simeria. Specific to this area is the intensive industrial development that took place both in the communist era, but also previously, process the effects of which are still apparent in the area. The impact of the massive industrialization in the communist era was mainly focused on the access to the professional field, with respect to both women and men, as women performing traditionally “manly” activities being involved in the “imposed normality” of the communist regime that, at least apparently, disregarded any gender differences.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Hollis, *Introducere în filosofia științelor sociale*, (București: Trei, 2001), 159;

<sup>10</sup> Petru Iluț, *Abordarea calitativă a sociumanului – concepte și metode*, (Iași: Polirom, 1997), 54 - 55;

<sup>11</sup> That is the reason why I have chosen not to use the results of the group interviews in this study.

The analysis method of the research data is interpretative in nature, as opposed to the ones requiring the codification of the information, therefore promoting the dynamic analyses, the interactivity between the researcher and the subject, thereby aiming at revealing the meanings deriving from such interactions<sup>12</sup>. With respect to the “subject” – “object” interactions I assume a reflexive feminist approach involving the interaction of the two during the research, “admitting the personal involvement of the researcher and [...] considering gender not only as research object, but also as internal dimension of the entire analytical undertaking”<sup>13</sup>.

**Results of the research.** In the introductory section I was stating that the professional aspect has an important role in the lives of the subjects, as most of them have a rich professional history, associated either with a single workplace, or with many, their professional continuity being enhanced and valued, while the stories regarding the periods of professional inactivity were accompanied by supplementary justifications. Therefore we are speaking of active women, constantly and intensely involved in income generating activities, both for the family and themselves. Moreover, paid work is valued by virtue of its capacity to determine a certain economic independence from the husband and/or other family members, as well as a sphere in which they can manifest themselves as professional agents, as citizens contributing to the general welfare of the family, community and society as a whole. They have the capacity of developing their abilities, of engaging in fields that satisfy their need of self respect and social acknowledgement. Last but not least, paid work is associated with the generation of social capital within the “workmate network”, which is valued and used in both professional and extraprofessional contexts.

Up to this point, the picture seems to be taken out of a socialist propaganda theory advocating women’s emancipation through work and “social production”<sup>14</sup>. However, this picture is incomplete as long as we do not also consider the activities related to the housework and care, namely if we do not ask the following questions: considering this understanding of the paid work, what happens with the housework and family care activities? Is there a link between the independence taken as an effect of the access on the labor market and the configuration of the patriarchal nucleus within the family – the labor division according to gender? More to the point, what happens with the housework and care activities of these women that speak so naturally about the emancipation through work?

Enikő Vincze writes in her work *Diferența care contează* (*The Difference that Matters*): „But however we would try to justify it, the acknowledgement of the women’s need and possibility to earn from the activities performed on the labor market is not necessarily followed by the change in the cultural perceptions of the traditional labor division within the family”<sup>15</sup> This statement also holds

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Miles, Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, (California: Sage, 1994), 8;

<sup>13</sup> Enikő Magyari Vincze, *Diferența care contează. Diversitatea social-culturală prin lentila antropologiei feministe*, (Desire Foundation, 2002), 34;

<sup>14</sup> In “The Origins of the Family, Private Property and State” Engels wrote: “The situation changes with the emergence of the patriarchal family and of the isolated monogamous family in particular. The household administration lost its public character. It was of no concern to society any more; it became a private service; the wife became the first servant, being removed from the social order. Only the great industry of our age has reopened woman’s access to the social production – and only to the proletarian woman that is. However, only in such a way that if she fulfills her duties within the family’s private service, she is excluded from the social production and can earn no income; and if she chooses to take part in the social production and to live on her own work she finds herself in the impossibility of tending to her familial duties [...] Within the family, he (the man) is the bourgeois and the woman is the proletariat [...] And then it will become obvious that the first condition for the liberation of women is for the entire feminine sex to return to the social production.” In Karl Marx. Fridrich Engels, *Opere alese*, vol. II, (Bucharest: The Printing House of the Romanian Laborers Party, 1952), 211 – 212 (my translation); Also see the „feminist authors” of the communist age, namely Mathilda Neil, *Drama eliberării femeii*, (Bucharest: Editura Politică, 1974); Ecaterina Deliman, *Femeia, personalitate politică în societatea noastră socialistă*, (Bucharest : Editura Politică, 1977);

<sup>15</sup> Enikő Magyari Vincze, *Diferența care contează. Diversitatea social-culturală prin lentila antropologiei feministe*, (Desire Foundation, 2002), 161;

true for this research. Henceforth, I will make a short presentation of the way in which the housework and care activities are in reality, structured.

**„Generally, I manage all the housework, but my husband helps me from time to time.”**

As Vincze said, the fact that women have access to paid work and that this activity can be regarded as a potential source of empowerment has little effect on the assumption of the gender roles within the housework and care activities. Namely, women continue to “perform” most of these activities by virtue of the cultural-patriarchal<sup>16</sup> norms and values which define them as main “household managers” and providers of the care services.

The questions by which I have approached the aspects related to the housework and care activities belong to the classical set regarding these aspects, but the subject has been approached in two stages. More exactly, in the first stage the subjects were asked who manages in the household the cooking, ironing, washing, cleaning as well as the care and education of children, respectively the caring of the elderly. I have sought to point out the way in which the subjects relate to these aspects in a friendly environment, without explicitly introducing the gender variable in the questions. The question that marked the second stage of the data gathering process was: “*But what does your husband do within the family?*”. Regardless of age, the dominant model would seem to be contained in the statement: “*I handle all house activities, but my husband helps me from time to time*”.

“(Who handles house work in your family?) I handle the house work and my mother helps me at some extent. (...the children care and education?) Yes, I handle the children’s care and education as well. (Going to meetings?) Only me. (If you had sick elderly in the family, who cared for them?) Well, usually, women take care of these things as well; we haven’t had any persons within the family that were seriously sick, for the time being our parents are at an age at which they don’t have very serious problems, but I think that, when the time comes, I will have to deal with these things as well[...] I handle everything. When I don’t feel well, as I have had surgery, I have a lady, that is very...up to my expectations, I call her and she helps me, as she is a non-working woman. [...] (the husband) He helps me, I don’t know, by cooking. His mother, when she was young, was a cook and as he learned a lot from her, he cooks sometimes. For example, some sort of gulasz, either Hungarian or, anyway, some traditional sort of food. Otherwise...it’s fairly comfortable”.<sup>17</sup>

“(Who handles the housework in your family?) Both of us, in our family. So, if I need help in the kitchen my husband is always available, always helpful. For example, if I want to make sarmale, which are more difficult to cook, my husband is redy to help, if we have to go shopping, for example tomorrow I leave work at..., will you wait for me to do the shopping? Everything is all right, he helps me.”<sup>18</sup>

“I think that he (the husband) has to become part of everything. He must know that we have no sugar, no salt, he must know that tomorrow is cleaning day, he must know that the children have no shoes, he has to be involved in all that is housework, he has to take part in it. (Was it so in your family?) Yes, so it was. I have involved him in everything that I could”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I consider here culture as a constraining structure and especially the role it plays in the patriarchal social construction. For a better understanding of the diachronic evolution of the discourse on the role of women within Romanian society also see Anthony Giddens’ definition of culture in *Sociology* (Bucharest: All, 2001), 625 and also Mihaela Miroiu, “Foreword”, in Maria Bucur, Mihaela Miroiu, *Patriarhat și emancipare în istoria gândirii politice românești*, (Iași: Polirom, 2002). Another good indicator of the gender cltural construction is the 2000 *Gender Barometer* realized by the Foundation for an Open Society.

<sup>17</sup> Interview 14, (V.D.), Hunedoara, 38 years;

<sup>18</sup> Interview 21(M.P.), Hunedoara, 40 years;

<sup>19</sup> Interview 75 (E.M.), Hunedoara, 69 years;

“(Who handled housework in your family?) Just me, in the beginning, afterwards both of us. You know that once men did nothing, nowadays they become more involved [...] Now the times have changed and men handle all sorts of things at home. Not only in my family, everywhere.”<sup>20</sup>

This type of relation to the housework and care activities is recurrent along the interviews. As such, we discover that the responsibility for these activities falls on the women.<sup>21</sup> Women are the ones that do the washing, cooking, ironing, as well as the children care and education and the caring of the sick and elderly within the family. The fact that men sometimes help by, does not change women’s responsibility in these fields, as they continue to be the ones fundamentally responsible with the organization of the family and with ensuring its functionality conditions.

It is interesting that this gender role configuration of the housework and care activities becomes an enormous advantage for the men that, from time to time, *give a hand* with the cooking. By the rare commodities principle, the discourse of the subjects is misguided with respect to the evaluation of their contribution in the family. As such, their occasional help is presented most of the times as a real partnership within the family. We are dealing here with a contrary effect to the small gender role changes that in the context of a profoundly patriarchal world are hyper-valued by the ones that are systematically disadvantaged by this mundane configuration, namely women. In this respect, it becomes rather obvious, from the previous conversations, that the initial remarks about the labor division within the family stress the partnership – we both handle..., we both perform household activities, and the husbands must become involved – but as the discourse becomes clearer it is remarkable how, in fact, men’s contributions are small given the volume and the constancy of the housework and care activities, that they are involved in the house work only at such times when the main providers of these services, the women, are overwhelmed.

More specifically, the burden of the double day shift is assumed by men, mainly when it cannot be handled only by women. As such, we find out from the subjects’ declarations that men mainly take part in housework by performing activities such as shopping, cleaning, and especially general cleaning (requiring physical strength). They also sometimes cook, which they actually enjoy doing, but they usually do that only for children and in the cases in which the mother or the grandmother are away or incapable of doing it. However, these activities are contingent, and quite rare, maybe save for the shopping, activity which, on the other hand, is realized under the close supervision of women.

Maria Bucur, in a work she wrote on this research, entitled *Citizenship, Gender, and the Everyday in Romania since 1945: Work and Care*, analyzes this excessive valorization of the housework realized by men, pointing out the fact that in this way women actually facilitate and contribute to the perpetuation of the gender division of labor by the fact that they don’t allow them to contribute, invoking their alleged lack of experience.<sup>22</sup>

Vincze also mentions this aspect when observing the low level of preoccupation by men with the domestic sphere, allegedly justified by the fact that women are more pragmatic in spirit, more skilful and trustworthy with respect to this type of activities.<sup>23</sup> **Thus women seem to be the accomplices of the perpetuation of their own exploitation within the family**, and this fact is all the more surprising as they are aware of the double day shift and of the partnership model of family relations.

<sup>20</sup> Interview 78 (M.B.), Hunedoara, 77 years;

<sup>21</sup> Also see Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspective*, (New York: Palgrave, 2003, second edition), 130 – 132; The Foundation for an Open Society, *The 2000 Gender Barometer*;

<sup>22</sup> Maria Bucur-Deckard, *Citizenship, Gender, and the Everyday in Romania since 1945: Work and Care*, NCEEER Working Paper;

<sup>23</sup> Enikő Magyari Vincze, *Diferența care contează. Diversitatea social-culturală prin lentila antropologiei feministe*, (Desire Foundation, 2002), 163;

An element that might prove helpful in understanding this type of perception is the distinction between *normal* and *normative* made by Martin Hollis<sup>24</sup>. In this context we could speak of the effects of the simple act of interviewing the subjects, that is of entering in the intimate sphere of the family life that can manifest by the constant relation to a normative sphere, to the desirable models and moral values, models which, this time, are not convergent with the lived normality and the performance of the gender roles. We must also bring in this equation the cultural elements that discuss the traditionally originated idealized image of the woman<sup>25</sup>. “The dirty laundry is washed within the family” is the motto of the clear distinction between the public and the private spheres<sup>26</sup> that imposes the perpetuation of the idealization of the family as the space of harmony and understanding. As such, we are faced here with two planes that do not overlap, but that, by virtue of the realization of the moral value of normativity are abusively and unconvincingly joined. The effects are the hypervalorization of men’s contributions in the household, as well as the identification of some explanations supporting the auto-reflexive and autonomous assumption of these tasks by women. Furthermore, this phenomenon can also be interpreted as a manner of avoiding the dissonance resulting from the distinction of the two planes, namely that of the lived normality and that of the desirable normativity.

**The irony of the discourse – a way of signaling auto-reflexivity.** Although the dominant model of the distribution of the housework and care activities is the one presented above, there are also some other important aspects. One of them is the one related to the irony of the discourse regarding men’s participation to the housework activities, which is very strongly supported by elements of para-language, respectively mimic and gesture language<sup>27</sup>. This way of communicating with respect to men’s contributions within the household suggest, on the one hand, the normality of their absence from such activities, on the other, the realization and reflexive assumption by women of their position as main service suppliers within the family.

*(Who handles the housework?).* It depends, but in general I can say that we do that together. That is, not exclusively me or my husband, he also gives a hand. *(And what sort of activities do you perform, as distinct from the ones your husband performs?)* I cook, he takes out the garbage, does the vacuum-cleaning, stuff like that. In general we share them (she laughs). *(Who takes care of the children?)* Generally me, as he is away most of the time. He comes late from work, so to say. (she laughs)”<sup>28</sup>

“Well naturally, I did the housework, together with my mother, but I had a lot of help. When I came from work at two o’clock, when I was working in the morning shift, everything was ready, the food, the children brought from school or kindergarten when they were smaller [...]. Until I was 42 I haven’t cooked, as long as my mother lived and she helped me a lot and I miss her very much. *(Does your husband help you?)* He helps me now (she laughs) in his old age, he helps me with the

<sup>24</sup> The *normal* behavior deriving from the role performance and the *normative* behavior, that holds moral value.

<sup>25</sup> From the interviews there derives the notion that the family must be that space in which one always finds understanding and support, that includes only those who are the closest and always willing to help. With the members of the family, one can share both the joys and the hardships. The family provides guiding models, as the parents and the grandparents are the ones paving one’s way in life. Generally speaking, although not perfect, your family is functional. Although some problems are due to arise, most of them are minor as compared to what “the others” face.

<sup>26</sup> In keeping with the definition of the two spheres in the patriarchal societies. Also see Okin’s objection to the public-private distinction in Susan Moller Okin, *Gender, the Public, and the Private*, in Anne Phillips, ed. *Feminism and Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998);

<sup>27</sup> See Goffman’s distinction between *expressions we give* and *expressions we give off* in Erving Goffman, *Viața cotidiană ca spectacol*, (Bucharest: Comunicare.ro, 2007), 32;

<sup>28</sup> Interview 09 (A.M.), Hunedoara, 35 years.

shopping, I make him a list and he goes, he drives there and buys things, that's how he helps me. With other things around the house he is unskillful.”<sup>29</sup>

We can infer from the interviews that these women are not only auto-reflexive but that they also constantly operate on these two planes, that they are capable of identifying them as such, and of assuming critical positions in their respect, and especially that the way in which they resort to irony indicates their attempt to reduce the dissonance of their exploitation in the family using tricks by which they explain logically, both to themselves and to the others, this configuration of reality.

Therefore, they are women who are consciously aware of the way in which the family and the power relations are structured and, more than that, of the abnormality of this configuration. From here on, by virtue of the traditional idealized image of the family, acting as a cultural constraint by imposing the perfect family – perfection of which the women are mainly responsible, “I say that the woman creates the mood of the house”<sup>30</sup> – the discourse is shaped rather by the model of the desirable family and not by that of the existing family. However, the irony deconstructs this structure and facilitates the disclosure of the subjects' perception of the reality, assumed as such but, very importantly, also contested.

The picture of the aware realization of the family inequalities is completed, besides the irony, by the painful experiences they had as a consequence of the patriarchal constraints, by the stories regarding their self-sacrifice for the family and especially the children, by their constant efforts to be their mother, father and friend.

“[...] I had to handle everything, the housework, to go to the radio and, when coming home, unwashed dishes awaited in the sink. That's how problems start, with small quarrels about the household. That's where the first misunderstandings start, that is where the first differences appear and then you start to be insensitive to the other's attitude, when he doesn't understand to how much work, to how much effort, the woman is subjected. I have been (subjected) for several years...I felt abused by so many problems, for they were many, and nobody understands you at work, there you have to live up, to get through any situation, to act like a man. And when coming home to act like a woman, like a woman from king Louis's time, to do everything”<sup>31</sup>.

“It was pretty hard for me to get by and it seems to me that [...] this double capacity assumed by a mother that says “I have to be both mother and father” places you somewhere above and maybe I haven't developed such a good friendship with my children [...] it seems to me that I haven't managed in keeping that certain warm relationship in which the children are very comfortable, because I thought there was as much need for authority as for friendship and they probably understood more of the authority (she smiles) than of the friendship. This is how I explain it.”<sup>32</sup>

The two forms of discourse complete each other, and while irony leaves more room for interpretation, when the stories are clear, followed by examples and, not few times, by arguments for the disadvantaged position of women within the family, the accounts are about facts and facts are hard to deny. The ingredients substantiating these accounts are related to the classical aspects of the housework, that is to the routine, dissatisfaction, invisibility and underestimation of these activities.

**The generational inheritance of the housework and care activities – women's support networks.** In all this struggle with the burden of the double shift workday, there constantly appears a character that not only helps, but whose help in the accomplishment of these two lines of work, i.e. paid work and housework, was indispensable. Unsurprisingly, this character is also a woman, a mother or a stepmother and very rarely, a man. Generally however, the latter's participation to the housework and care activities takes place only when there is no other woman in the family that can assume these tasks, more exactly when the extended family doesn't include a mother or a

<sup>29</sup> Interview 60 (M.A.), Hunedoara, 59 years;

<sup>30</sup> Interview 75 (E.M.), Hunedoara, 69 years;

<sup>31</sup> Interview 90 (C.P.), Peștiș, 48 years;

<sup>32</sup> Interview 64 (M.C.), Hunedoara, 60 years.



grandmother, just the same as happens with men who, in their capacity as husbands or fathers help only in the extent that the wives and mothers do not manage by themselves.

“And we lived together with my stepmother and my stepmother was a very hardworking woman and I had much to learn from her. As it is said, one steals the skills, steals much of everything. Therefore, I have learned a lot from her. Maybe she said it at the time, maybe...this is how it is with the young today, but I have learned a lot from her and especially from her mother. Her mother lived 98 years and she lived with me, I supported her. After her husband died, my stepmother also lived with me for 8 years. She was an extraordinary old woman, she was very wise. She learned to read from the Bible, she was extremely faithful and God-fearing. [...] She helped me a lot, my stepmother, but on Saturdays I did the rest of the work. Naturally, she helped me, she cooked and so on...but I washed, a little cleaning by which my husband also contributed. (*Who took care of the child?*) Us and my step mother and at that time we had a neighbor that took care of her until my stepmother came and after we came from work, we cared for her. Then, she went to kindergarten and to school.”<sup>33</sup>

“I tell you, even the house I have made it rather by myself then together with him. Because back home we have made the foundation, and then my husband left when my daughter was one year old, he went to Poland with the work. I have stayed for seven months with two children, two elderly and only the foundation of the house and there was nothing we could do. After seven months, when he came back – meanwhile I received his salary here, he received money there and I also received here, but I didn’t go to work, I retained only the money I needed for the children, and back home, at the countryside, we took our food from the garden, we had a cow, sheep, birds and the money I put in the bank – when he came back we could build the house. But how? My parents helped me, my mother cooked for the masons and me and my father made the building materials and we carried them with the buckets, actually I am surprised that I have lived this long given how much weight I have lifted. And my husband came home and didn’t stay more than three days, the company car came for him. And thus me and my parents did most of the work, as I lived with them.”<sup>34</sup>

“When my child was small I have stayed home for two years and took care of him and then, I was lucky that we lived with my stepmother and for about one year she took care of him and then, when he was three, we sent him to kindergarten.”<sup>35</sup>

Obviously, in all these interviews, the sentiment of a shared knowledge of these women’s housework and care activities is pervasive. Today’s grandmothers are aware of the value of the help they received from their mothers and stepmothers and help, in their turn, the young mothers and wives.

We could speak of the existence of family support networks, created by and for women for the purpose of reducing the constraints generated by the gender roles.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, we can speak of the existence of the double shift workday in the case of many women – the active period on the work market by the performance of both the professional and the housework activities and, in the retirement period, with house and care activities for at least two families, the main one and the one/ones of the child/children. These support networks are extended beyond the family on different events such as weddings, baptizing, funerals, which would prove the existence of women’s sisterhood.<sup>37</sup>

**We can therefore give account of the appearance of alternative solutions to the negative effects of the double shift workday, but that, at the same time, can ensure the optimal**

<sup>33</sup> Interview 63 (S.M.), Hunedoara, 60 years.

<sup>34</sup> Interview 65 (A.G.), Hunedoara, 60 years.

<sup>35</sup> Interview 28 (S.C.), Hunedoara, 43 years.

<sup>36</sup> Also see Laura Surdu, „Relații de înțajutorare”, in Manuela Sofia Stănculescu, Ionica Berevoescu, *Sărac lipit, caut altă viață*, (Bucharest: Nemira, 2004), 334;

<sup>37</sup> For further details see Phyllis Chesler, *Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009, first 2001), especially chapter 3 *Woman’s sexism*, 124 – 166 and chapter 9 *Woman in groups*, 390 – 435;

performance of these tasks deriving from the assumption of the traditional gender roles. It is important to stress the fact that the purpose of these women support networks is not to contest the patriarchal norms, as one might think, but quite the contrary, the efforts are made towards the assumption of this state of affairs as normality and the acceptance of certain supplementary constraints, as the performance of paid work. As such, these women adapt to the patriarchal environment in which they live, but, at the same time, shape this environment in accordance with their needs and expectations.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, this normality is unique and it manifests as a constraining structure that, although dissonant with respect to individual normality – I hereby refer to the auto-reflexivity and realization of the normative model – has the capacity to impose its self-perpetuation.

### Conclusions.

This configuration of the gender roles, both within the family and in its *immediate vicinity*, that is in the community, point out the low level of interests' politization. Even though these support networks, essentially grounded on the awareness of sharing certain common experiences, are beneficial for women, they just as much constitute the main vehicle for the perpetuation of the traditional gender roles in which women are the providers of the housework and care services.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, these networks, fairly functional otherwise, contribute to the strengthening of the public – private division, in the deformed sense of the patriarchal structure<sup>40</sup>, and to the interests' atomization. When speaking of the interests atomization I refer not so much to an alleged lack of awareness with respect to the common interests – as the abovementioned women support networks are proof of its existence – as to the lack a consistent public manifestation in this respect, fact which hinders their transposition into public policies.<sup>41</sup> The potential of the awareness of the common interests is diluted by the attempt to cope with the family and community problems. Moreover, the non-political nature of the coagulation of these interests is strengthened by the public – private distinction which is one of the basic elements of the patriarchal normality and which potentates the barrier between the personal and the political. The personal is private and, therefore, non-political, context in which the realization of the common interests does not have the possibility to actually contest the patriarchal system or, at least, to submit to the public agenda the gender interests but, quite the contrary, it becomes a vehicle for the perpetuation of the constraints by creating certain alternative mechanisms for the support of the interests, unframed however in the normality of the traditional gender roles.

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<sup>38</sup> See Cuche's definition of culture: "Culture allows the human being not only to adapt to its environment, but to adapt the latter to itself, to its needs and projects; in other words, culture makes the transformation of nature possible" – Dennys Cuche, *Noțiune de cultură în științele sociale*, (Iași: The European Institute, 2003), 18;

<sup>39</sup> Also see Judith Grant, *Fundamental Feminism: contesting the core concepts of feminist theory*, (New York: Routledge, 1993);

<sup>40</sup> See Susan Moller Okin, *Gender, the Public, and the Private*, în Anne Phillips, ed. *Feminism and Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998);

<sup>41</sup> Also see the criticism of the witness identity in Moya Loyd, *Beyond Identity Politics. Feminism, Power and Politics*. (London]: Sage Publication 2005), 35 – 40;

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