

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN ROMANIA - A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

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Abstract

In Romania the access of women to political decision making remains very low (around 10% women in Parliament). The main arguments used to explain this state of affairs are the following: the communist feminism (a contradiction in terms) which impose total obedience towards the state and a completely false and forced political empowerment of women which led to an arduous reverse after 1989 (Miroiu 2004; Vinkze 2006); the transition anti-socialist speech that militated in favor of the return to normality, understood as traditional patriarchy (Rueschemeyer, 1994), the gender-developed inequities of transition (Vincze 2006; Miroiu 2004, 2007); the lack of time as a citizenship resource (the double burden) (Lister, 2003). Even tough, what meanings do women attach to their status of citizens and how do they take part at political actions, in the context in which compelling structures, like patriarchy, the communist legacy and post-communist transition are overlapping their daily experiences, remains under studied in Romania. In order to fill this gap, in my paper I will present the result of a field work research (qualitative method interviews and focus-groups) focused on the way in which women live and experience citizenship, with accent on the perception and signification of their political participation. My arguments will be developed based on a constructivist approach which underline the relations and dependencies between agents (that give meaning to the social roles they play in my paper women from a region in Romania, Hunedoara county) and structures (mainly the patriarchal one).

Keywords: *women, political participation, România, constructivist approach*

1. Introduction

In the following paper, I want to point out aspects that shape women's political participation, while aiming to identify those elements which may generate their successful substantial implication in politics, a domain that is steel deeply **masculinized**. In order to do so I will present the results of a research that was conducted as part of *Gender and citizenship in Romania*, my PHD Thesis, and it focused on the way in which women live and experience citizenship. The main research question of my PHD paper was: what meanings do women attach to their status of citizens and how do they, based on the latter, choose to perform citizenship, in the context in which compelling structures, like patriarchy, the communist legacy and post-communist transition, overlap their daily experiences? In order to answer this question, besides the presentation and assumption of a theoretical framework, I also conducted fieldwork and the operationalization of citizenship that resulted from the latter conducted me towards the idea of political participation. While focusing on citizenship as practice, as an institution that generates rights and obligations, one that is under a permanent process of construction and reconstruction, participation (civic, political, inside the family, on the labor market, etc.) became the core of my thesis. In line with the goals of this paper, I will focus in the following part on the results concerning the political participation of women.

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In the first part of my paper, I will present the sociological framework used for my analysis and the methodologies applied for the two researches. I will then present the conceptual framework used in the analysis and interpretation of the data, followed by a short presentation of the context that individualizes the political participation experience of local women. The final part of the paper is dedicated to the results and conclusions of the research.

2. Approach

As for the sociological framework, my arguments are developed based on social constructivism, a paradigm that may be summarized by the tradition of interpretive epistemology and by a dynamic view over the social universe that solves the agent-structure dilemma by treating the latter as interdependent¹. The analyses will be based on the relations and dependencies between agents (that give meaning to the social roles they play) and structures (mainly the patriarchal one, which imposes gender normativity and everyday normality). The individuals are treated as actors, as subjects that are capable of acting autonomously and responsibly, capable of evolving, of challenging and changing structures, depending on the meanings which they attach to the latter. A social constructionist approach focuses on individuals, who are seen as being able to construct social reality by attaching meanings to it, but this construction process is not isolated or independent from the reality that transgresses the individuals, a reality that becomes stable, institutionalized and which generates determinations. Complementary to this framework, I also have a feminist stand, when analyzing the data, one that is based on the liberating potential of feminism and resulting from the deconstruction of gender differences and the challenging of the latter, which are seen as creating illegitimate hierarchies in a democratic society.

3. Methodology

In order to grasp the thinking and experiences of regular women (*the first dimension of the research – bottom-up analysis*), in terms of political participation, the findings of the fieldwork were analyzed through a complex process that included documentation and becoming familiar with the environment in which meaning was created by the subjects and also individual and group interviews. As for the sample of the research, the subjects were recruited using theoretical sampling, in line with the qualitative methodology of the research, which had an ethno-methodological nature, and in line with the research tools chosen for the study (96 semi-structured interviews and 3 focus groups). The subjects were chosen based on theoretical considerations, in order to compare the data and to test the research questions². We used gender (women), age and area of residence (urban) as the main sampling criteria. Age was introduced as a sampling criteria as the goals of the research required information coming from fully mature respondents, from the perspective of gender experiences (division of labor, gender roles, care, autonomy or dependency inside the family) and of political participation. We should point out that the sample of this research was by no means representative, from the point of view of quantitative research, because our qualitative study aimed for a deeper understanding than that provided by statistical data. The research took place in Hunedoara, Deva and Simeria, three cities from Hunedoara County, Romania. This region is characterized

¹ See Peter Berger; Thomas Luckmann, *Construirea socială a realității (The social construction of reality)*, (București: Art, 2008, first edition 1966); Brent G. Wilson, "Reflection on Constructivism and Instructional Design", in Charles L. Dills, Alexander J. Romiszowski ed., *Instructional Development Paradigms*, (New Jersey: Educational Technology Publication, 1997), 63 – 67;

² Petru Iluț, *Abordarea calitativă a socioumanului – concepte și metode*, (Iași: Polirom, 1997), 54 - 55;

by the intensive industrial development that took place during communism the effects of which are still making their way into the present lives of its residents.

The data analysis method that I will use is one that follows the guidelines of interpretativism, while avoiding methods that require the coding of information and promoting dynamic analyses and the interactivity between researcher and the subject of the research, thus aiming to reveal the meanings and representations resulted from such interactions³.

4. Conceptual clarifications

Before moving on to the presentation and analysis of the data, we should first of all define several fundamental concepts, the first of which is patriarchy. Patriarchy is defined by most as the manifestation and institutionalization of male domination over the women and children of a family and extending this domination over women in general⁴. While talking about patriarchy from the perspective of intensity, Allan Johnson states that a society is patriarchal if it *privileges men* – being *dominated by men*⁵, *identified by men*⁶ and *centered on men*⁷ – and that is organized around *men's obsession of being in control*⁸. Therefore, patriarchal communities support sexist attitudes and behaviors, while sexism and patriarchy support each other in the same way in which slavery enhances discriminatory attitudes and behaviors⁹.

In this paper, patriarchy will be treated mainly from the perspective of the two dimensions proposed by Mihaela Miroiu: the descriptive one (reveals the prevalent organization of public and private relations based on a widely supported paradigm, by church and state alike: man rules over the woman) and the normative one (indicates the way in which these relations should be configured: man should rule over the woman)¹⁰. Starting with the observation and presentation of the elements that are related to patriarchal constructs, my fieldwork focused on the way in which the later regulate the everyday lives of Romanian women.

Another concept that I will use in the paper is represented by gender roles. The latter may be described from a systemic point of view, as restrictive elements that reflect a universe of social preferences that deliver shortcuts for what is *normal* (seen as distinct from normative). This view treats gender roles as if they were forces transmitted along the line of social status, but also as indicators of the preferences typically associated with a social position¹¹. On the other hand, we may develop the content of the concept of role by viewing agents as active actors, as agents of change, while maintaining in the subsidiary the position of sentient and complete conformism in relation to a position associated to a particular social structure.

Starting from such a dual configuration, I will present the way in which women assume and perform certain roles, most of which having to do with political participation, as well as the meanings associated with such social performances. Obviously, the normality prescribed by the patriarchal configuration of gender roles and the tensions resulting from this

³ Matthew Miles, Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, (California: Sage Publication, 1994), 8;

⁴ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 239;

⁵ The political, legal, religious, economic, educational, military and domestic authority belongs to men.

⁶ The hard cultural nucleus on what is good, desirable, preferable or normal is associated with what we think about men and masculinity.

⁷ Attention is focused on men and on what they do.

⁸ Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot. Unrevealing Our Patriarchal Legacy*, ediția a doua, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 19 - 20;

⁹ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 240;

¹⁰ Mihaela Miroiu, Prefață, în Maria Bucur, Mihaela Miroiu, *Patriarhat și emancipare în istoria gândirii politice românești*, (Iași: Polirom, 2002), 12;

¹¹ Martin Hollis, *Introducere în filosofia științelor sociale*, (București: Trei, 2001), 158;

relation will be granted special attention. Gender will be treated as a multidimensional social construct (*status*¹², *identity assumption*¹³ and *manifestation formula*¹⁴ that can be identified from everyday performance – gender as practice¹⁵.

More than that, in line with the constructionist framework applied to the concepts used by this research, the definitions of gender, identity and identity construct take on specific meanings. Avigal Eisenberg talks about identity as covering “the attachments and activities that are important to the ‘self-conception’ or ‘self-understanding’ of an individual group”¹⁶. In the terms of Berger and of Luckman, identity represents the product of the interiorization that follows continuous socialization, when this process is accompanied by identification¹⁷. I will try to cover the way in which self-concept is constructed, in relation to political participation, in the following pages.

Political participation is also a key concept of the paper and it is defined in report to the classic distinction between civic participation and political participation. The distinction between the two types of participation is based on Locke’s tradition of the social contract that distinguishes between civil society and political society¹⁸ and on the distinction between interest and pressure made by Dominico Fisichella¹⁹ and Samuel Finer²⁰. Civil participation means to promote one’s interest using alternate channels which aren’t tied directly to the influence of the political sphere and it is constructed mainly around the interactions between citizens. Civil interaction has a high potential of becoming political participation, but it doesn’t necessarily aim to change, maintain or obtain political power, nor does it aim to assume the responsibility of governance. As for political participation, it promotes and defends interests by influencing decision makers and/ or elections and it may involve the use of legal or illegal sanctions. It includes the range of acts and attitudes, visible or invisible, that tend to influence (more or less directly, more or less legally) the decisions of those holding the power in the political system or in the political organizations, understood as independent entities, as well as their election, in the perspective of preserving or modifying the structure of the system of dominant interests²¹.

5. Context

While describing the Romanian context of the political participation of women, we cannot overlook the communist heritage and the post-communist transition. During communism, the emancipation of men, but mostly that of women, was related directly to work. That is why in that period we see a massive number of women entering the labor market, doubled by the constraints of the communist regime, in which traditional patriarchy was replaced by a state-institutionalized patriarchy characterized by imposing devotion to the

¹² The position of dominator or dominated that is associated to gender.

¹³ The way in which each individual identifies himself in report to gender, depending on the embraced lifestyle.

¹⁴ The way in which the attached behaviors are closer or further from the performance “standards” of gender roles and relations – see Judith Lorber, “Embattled Terrain: Gender and Sexuality”, in Myra Marx Ferree, Judith Lorber, Beth B Hess, ed., *Revisioning Gender. The Gender Lens*, (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publisher, 2000), 417;

¹⁵ H. Don Zimmerman, „Doing Gender”, *Gender and Society*, vol.1, nr. 2, 125 – 151; Vezi și Mary Holmes, *Gender and Everyday Life*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 37 – 43;

¹⁶ Avigal Eisenberg, *Reasons of Identity. A Normative guide to the political and legal Assessment of Identity Claims*, (Londra: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18;

¹⁷ Peter Berger; Thomas Luckmann, *Construirea socială a realității (The social construction of reality)*, (București: Art, 2008, first edition 1966), 238;

¹⁸ John Locke, Al doilea tratat despre cărmuire. Scrisoare despre toleranță, (București: Nemira, 1999), 104 – 106;

¹⁹ Domenico Fisichella, *Știința Politică. Probleme, concepte, teorii*, (Iași: Polirom, 2007), (2004), 171 -177;

²⁰ Samuel E. Finer, „Interest Groups and then Political Process in Great Britain”, in Hanry Walter Ehrmann, *Interest Groups in Four Continents*, (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 1958);

²¹ Gianfranco Pasquino, *Curs de știință politică*, (Iași: Institutul European, 2002), 53;

party, in order to support the construction of the communist society²². As for the political sphere, starting with the '70s, we see a massive promotion of women, based on a minimum representation quota of 25%, in workers, communal, city and county committees, as well as in the party bureaus of the factories, institutions and farming units. One should point out that women's access to the political organizations was inversely proportional with the decision power of those organizations and that Elena Ceausescu was the only woman to have ever reached the top of communist decisional making ladder²³. To be more exact, in 1974, CC-PCR's CePex included two women (9%), while in 1979 it included 5 (20%) and in 1984 it included 3 (14%). As for the Central Committee, the evolution was the following:

- Fully pledged members - 1965 – 5% women; 1979 – 20%; 1989 – 24%;
- Substitute members – 1965 – 7%; 1979 – 32%; 1989 – 39%.²⁴

Eastern Europe is still seeing an ongoing debate about the tie between communism and the emancipation of women, but we will follow in the footsteps of Mihaela Miroiu, who states that “communist feminism” is a contradiction in terms, since the emancipation of women that took place during communism meant in fact total obedience towards the state²⁵.

Post-communist transition developed particularities that have to do with a symbolic patriarchal order, understood as women recognizing the full authority of men in all respects, overlapped by the effects of la left-wing conservatism that took its toll on gender policies. Gender-developed inequities never made the formal agenda or the public agenda of the Romanian governments during post-communist rule²⁶. There are various causes that have led to such gender policies after 1989, among which: the anti-socialist speech that was militated in favor of the return to “normality”, understood as traditional patriarchy²⁷ (men belong to the public sphere, while women to the private one); the fact that the political participation of communist women was perceived as being the sole result of the communist policies and as having little if any to do with competence and righteousness – something also called the Elena Ceaușescu²⁸ Syndrome; last, but not least, the fact that any attempt of introducing the issue of women on the public agenda immediately after the revolution was associated by the public with the egalitarian socialist ideology, which may explain the aversion for feminism and feminists seen in the Romanian society nowadays²⁹.

The statistical data on the political representation of women is as follows:

Mandate	Total MPs	Of which women	% women
1990 – 1992	486	24	4.93

²² See Mihaela Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie*, (Iași : Polirom, 2004), 188 and Mihaela Miroiu, “Communism was a State Patriarchy, not a State Feminism”, *Aspasia*, vol. 1; See Enikő Magyar-Vincze, „Romanian Gender Regimes and Women's Citizenship”, Jasmina Lukić, Joanna Regulska, Darja Zaviršek, *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 28 – 30;

²³ Cristina Liana Olteanu, Elena-Simona Gheoanea, Valentin Gheoanea, *Femeile în România Comunistă*, (București: Politeia-SNSPA, 2003), 32;

²⁴ Cristina Liana Olteanu, Elena-Simona Gheoanea, Valentin Gheoanea, *Femeile în România Comunistă*, (București: Politeia-SNSPA, 2003), 37;

²⁵ See Mihaela Miroiu, “Communism was a State Patriarchy, not a State Feminism”, *Aspasia*, vol. 1;

²⁶ See Enikő Magyar-Vincze, „Romanian Gender Regimes and Women's Citizenship”, în Lukić Jasmina, Regulska Joanna, Zaviršek Darja, *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 30 – 35;

²⁷ Vezi și Mary Ellen Fischer, “From Tradition and Ideology to Election and Competition. The Changing Status of Women in Romanian Politics”, în Marilyn Rueschemeyer (ed.), *Women in politics of postcommunist Eastern Europe*, (Londra: ME Sharpe, 1994), 177;

²⁸ See Cristina Liana Olteanu, Elena-Simona Gheoanea, Valentin Gheoanea, *Femeile în România Comunistă*, (București: Politeia-SNSPA, 2003), 42 – 55; see Mary Ellen Fischer, „Women in Romanian Politics: Elena Ceaușescu, Pronatalism and the Promotion of Women”, in Sharon L. Wolchik, Alfred G. Meyer (ed.), *Women, State and Party in Eastern Europe*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 121 – 137;

²⁹ Enikő Magyar-Vincze, „Romanian Gender Regimes and Women's Citizenship” in Regulska, Darja Zaviršek, *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 30 – 31;

1992 – 1996	481	18	3.74
1996 - 2000	483	23	4.76
2000 – 2004	481	52	10.81
2004 - 2008	460	47	10.21
2008 - present	471	46	9.76

Source: Tudorina Mihai, *Gender quota and their application in Romania*, dissertation thesis, 2001, pg 32, accessed on June 7, 2012 at:

http://media1.webgarden.ro/files/media1:4f869b1f10e27.pdf.upl/Tudorina_Mihai__Cotele_de_gen_si_aplicarea_lor_in_Romania.pdf

As for the representation of women in other political decision making positions, Tudorina Mihai presents a snapshot of the Romanian context. Romania didn't see a woman minister until 1996.

According to the National Agency for the Equality Between Men and Women, in 2008, women had 12.6% of the total county council positions and 10.7% of the local councilor seats. Until 2012 Romania has not seen a woman mayor in any of its large cities (now it has one – Olguta Vasilescu), nor has the country seen a woman Prime Minister or President. Pieced together, the data ranks Romania among the last countries in the world, in terms of the political empowerment of women: 109th out of 134 countries.³⁰

6. The results of the research

In the following section I will focus on several elements of interests for the paper, elements like: political organizations and public office – involvement, evaluation and candidature. Political participation will be analyzed in relation to the membership of political organizations, but also while taking an evaluative stand towards the latter. The issue of public office is another element included in the analysis and it will be followed from the perspective of running for public office and from the perspective of the interactions between women voters and those in office, while aiming to identify the factors contributing to becoming a candidate, the significations associated with such a position, in terms of public responsibility, and the attributions that should be included in the formal or informal job description. More than that, the issue of public office will also be analyzed according to the relation between citizens, the main beneficiaries of the responsible exercise of the powers associated with each office, and those who are elected in office.

Besides the above mentioned guidelines, I will analyze separately the answers to a set of questions that included the gender variable and that focus on aspects related to the political involvement of women, while presenting ways of interpreting and attaching meaning to reality. (Why do you think that there are so few women in Romanian politics? Would you vote for a woman president?), but also projections on the possible effects of women's involvement in politics (Do you believe that things would be different if more women were involved in politics? Why? How?)

Participation, in relation to structures and political organizations

The implication in organizations and political structures represents political activism, meaning access to positions of power that involve decision making or influencing the process of decision making. I will present the way in which the respondents attach meaning to this

³⁰ Tudorina Mihai, *Gender quota and their application in Romania*, dissertation thesis, 2001, 32 - 33, accessed on June 7, 2012 at: http://media1.webgarden.ro/files/media1:4f869b1f10e27.pdf.upl/Tudorina_Mihai__Cotele_de_gen_si_aplicarea_lor_in_Romania.pdf

type of participation in the following part of the paper, while stressing out effective membership to political organizations (parties) and the latter's evaluation, since this may prove to be the main argument in favor or against active involvement³¹. Also, in order to evaluate the governance process, public office representatives and the decision making positions themselves, one has to first analyze the membership to political organizations and the way the respondents relate to this form of participation, as being efficient or not in relation to their interests and resources.

The negative attitude towards real political practice in general

Is very frequent, despite the wide range of descriptive and explanatory versions presented by the respondents, and a general hostility transpires from all the interviews, a hostility aimed *against political parties, politicians and politics in general*. This attitude is supported by first hand experience (membership to various parties), but also by a generalized assessment that politicians are irresponsible, thus making political involvement irrelevant compared to the pragmatism of everyday life. Political involvement is also seen as a form of support, of complicity with a well-defined category, one that includes the demagogues and the opportunists. What should be mentioned here is that the negative attitude manifested by the respondents is aimed not at politics in general, rather at the way in which politics is being enacted in Romanian society. Political involvement is perceived as *a means of contributing to welfare, an approach similar to the one of the republican and communitarian paradigms on citizenship and women seem to be willing to support such an involvement*. Although the experiences strictly related to gender differences, of the restrictions imposed by gender roles, but also the various experiences with which the women are confronted with come to shape various moments, means or contexts in which these women would become politically involved, there is clearly availability towards this way of involvement.

This suggests that *the political* is part of the everyday lives of these women³² and that *the political is identified by these women as a means of pursuing various interests*, according to their availability towards involvement and to the involvement of some of the respondents.

Nevertheless, there are some issues in terms of the congruence, or should we say incongruence, between "theory" and "practice", between doctrines, ideologies, programs, promises and political practice. In this case, we may talk about a general negative attitude towards the real, practiced politics³³. At the same time, the arguments supporting such an attitude are difficult to challenge, especially since they are supported by the experiences resulted from active involvement and not just by opinions or preconceptions towards "an uncharted territory" – *"My dear, three or four years ago I decided to join the party. Well, I was very excited by this [...] until I realized that it was all a bluff. (Meaning?) I was very, very disappointed. I saw only lies."*³⁴

What is political is not personal. The populism and the demagogy invoked when describing interactions with the political sphere are overlapped with dismissing the political as a means of achieving practical objectives, while the political offer is depicted as abstract, confusing and associated with lies and manipulation. Women are confronted with the difficulties of the double burden, with the lack of alternatives dedicated to the care of children

³¹ *Active participation*, which involves effective and conscious involvement of the individuals and of the groups in the governance process that affects their lives. *Passive participation* involves the fact that lack of action is a way of responding to or a form of assessment of the social contract, but also a form of acceptance of the status quo.

³² Before voting they access information using television shows (main source), but also using the Internet, reading newspapers, by talking to colleagues or to family members or by attending electoral meetings. Even more, they sometimes know the local representatives personally, they know their family or professional background. Quite frequently, in our interviews, we saw genuine analyses of compared politics, especially from those women who had never traveled abroad.

³³ Hollis' distinction between normal and normative is of help again here.

³⁴ Interview 30 (L.P.), Hunedoara, 47 years old;

or to other members of the family, with the lack of jobs, with the tensions between their careers and their family lives, with the burden of managing a family budget that is insufficient, most of the times, for the current spending of the family. In order to solve such issues they need solutions that are as concrete and objective as fatigue, stress, family tensions, issues which they face on an everyday basis, and politicians don't seem to provide them with solutions or answers that go beyond the declarative.

We are thus being confronted with an even wider gap between the political and the social, between the governed and the governors, between citizens and the representatives of the political community, but also with the fact that the social contract is stripped of all meaning, since its substantiality is being reduced to the fulfillment of certain obligations and to the confinement of the private sphere of interests. In this context, civil rights and the exertion of such rights may receive a symbolical meaning at most, one that may remind us of the original and instrumental functionality which guarantees the substantial exertion of citizenship, while having little, if any to do with the latter.

Such a representation of reality is a dangerous one, since women are affected by the patriarchal restraints that traditionally assign them further away from the political sphere. The effects make themselves felt in what we could call **“what is political is not personal”** or rather in the lack of awareness of the effects that politics has on their daily lives, while being only aware of personal survival strategies³⁵.

Privateness and a personal approach to the understanding of the relations with the political can also be understood and explained using the criteria based on which political representatives are voted for, but also by observing the information channels regarding such representatives and their political platforms. Our interviews reveal that, in fact, it is not the policy or program proposals made by candidates that are important, rather the qualities of the candidate: modesty, professional training, family background, interactions with the other candidates. The public policies proposed by the candidates have no real substance for the interviewed women and they are associated with populism, lies and demagoguery.

We can associate these representations with a damage control calculus based on the principle: politics is a dirty business and all those who become decision makers have to compromise, but some will compromise less than others, so we will vote for them. In this social representation puzzle, programs, policies and ideologies are associated with the structure, while representing the compromises themselves (fake promises made by the candidates in order to become decision makers), a mask that uses the shape, but not the consistency of democratic institutions and such a way of understanding social reality leads to elective preferences that are counterintuitive, meaning that the candidates compete in fact as persons against each other and not as the institutionalized representatives of policy drafts and proposals – *the one who promises more, lies more and we won't vote for he or she*³⁶ *or the message has nothing to do with reality [...] Geoana says „come back to the country and we will give you EUR 20,000”. And you call that a politician? How so? He drops a bomb like that and he thinks he impresses everyone.*³⁷

Politics is part of the everyday life of these women; they have a political way of understanding the world. Still we can't rule out the fact that the above mentioned comments could be criticized and that they need context, in order to gain consistency. Any of the following questions could be raised: what are the political expectations of these women or their expectations related to political representatives? Are they in line with the way in which we understand the organization and functioning of political parties and of the political sphere

³⁵ Strategies that rely on, as mentioned in the previous chapter, mainly on the help of family members, friends and of members of the community.

³⁶ Interview 22 (M.C.), Hunedoara, 41 years old;

³⁷ Interview 58 (M.B.), Hunedoara, 57 years old;

in general? Is their negative attitude directed towards politics, politicians or towards a representation of the latter that has nothing to do with the way in which we understand democratic political organization – and then is it that we have fallen into the trap of comparing two radically different political representations?

The answer to these questions is based on the data obtained when asking the respondents to mention the qualities that a political leader should have and to mention what issues had the local politicians solved for the community. We also asked the respondents to mention the main actions that they would do if they could manage the budget of their community.

The main qualities of a politician should be:

- a good speaker, a good communicator. A political leader should know how to transmit the message to the citizens, should be capable of making the latter understand the need of certain measures and to make them supporters of his or her agenda;

- honest, responsible, consistent - honesty is probably the most frequently mentioned quality and it is almost always mentioned as the counterpart of lies and false promises. Moreover, honesty is associated with responsibility, so those who don't sugarcoat reality are responsible people who understand the consequences of their words and actions;

- close to the voters – politicians should go out on the street and they should talk to citizens, thus becoming aware of their problems, instead of isolating themselves in their offices and making uninformed decisions. They should also be open-minded, patient and capable of talking to all the members of a community, irrespective of the latter's gender, education or status;

- a professional – in this case as well we will be talking mainly about the quality of generating the efficient management of resources. It is interesting that this quality has been cited more as a complement to the others. The talks revealed that the respondents believe it to be very important for any political candidate to be a true professional in any domain, in order to better understand the problems of a community and the people that they represent.

When considering the issues that were solved by local political representatives, the general impression is that we are dealing with the transfer of the gender distribution of chores and the overvaluation of the contribution of men to the latter, based on the principle that the more rare the good, the more praised it will be. To be more exact, local politicians and authorities have only solved a small part of the community's problems and their implication is overrated. This way of representing reality is very dangerous, since it decreases the expectations projected by the citizens onto their political representatives, thus making room for abuse, in terms of broken rights and freedoms, on one hand, and in terms of poor governance that is not sanctioned by the voters, on the other.

Perceptions on the political participation of women

The main questions of this subchapter were: How do the respondents perceive the political participation of women – do they value it, do they find it relevant; what are the main obstacles preventing women from being more politically involved.

"I've got nothing but respect for the women who are involved in politics. If they have the time and the nerves they should go ahead and do it!". Such general statements synthesize the essence of the women's stand on political participation. We find no reluctance from the respondents when it comes to the participation of women to a domain that is dominated by men, but also see that our respondents characterize women politicians with attributes that are culturally associated with men. We are thus seeing what Simone de Beauvoir argued in favor of in *The second sex* (1949), while trying to offer a key to understanding the absence of effective gender equality, although the formal one was guaranteed by the state: women have

to become men, in order to be equal to men³⁸. And to become a man means to have time, on one hand, and to be brave and to own resources (most of which financial). Both aspects transpose the paper to the core of gender studies. The references to time, understood by the respondents as a catalyst of active political involvement is directly directed to a central issue of gender studies, the fact that women have to constantly deal with the double burden. Therefore, women have less free time in general, time that could be dedicated to political involvement, since they value and practice paid labor, while also being responsible for unpaid domestic labor based on the general norms of the patriarchal society in which they live. At the same time, characterizing women politicians as having to be strong and brave clearly points out the association of politics with a sphere dominated by men, one that is shaped in the face of men so, therefore, one should act as a man in order to survive.

Besides these two aspects, the interviews also reveal other elements that define the political participation of women even better, among which:

- *the way in which women politicians are presented by the media* – the respondents mention the shallowness with which the media covers the political actions of women, the way in which such politicians are rather presented through the lens of sexuality, of sexual scandals and of the ties and support of various influential male politicians, rather than in relation to their actions and merits. In fact we are dealing with a genuine critique brought to mass-media's objectification of women³⁹. Mass-media reinforces the prejudices tied to women's political involvement, since it presents them as exotic presences that do nothing more but animate the political scene and not as being the legitimate representatives of the citizens. Even worse, women are sometimes depicted as being incapable of such serious actions;

- *men being identified as rivals* – this is yet another element that stands out from the interviews. Men being those in power, they aren't willing to share it with women, who are seen as part of their area of domination. Even more, they transfer the relations of power that take shape inside the household to the political arena, where the women that should become their colleagues and partners are seen from the perspective of gender roles and of the gender division of labor. This is why the political skills of women are highly and constantly challenged, since this field of action is seen as being separate from the "*frivolities of the everyday lives*"⁴⁰ of the citizens that it represents and whose administration if handled mainly by women. We should point out that the respondents identify men as a clearly shaped distinct group which acts as a barrier to political involvement⁴¹ - "*(Why do you think that there are so few women and so many men?) Well, they can't become involved because of them. Because men do what they have to do to kick them out*"⁴².

The differences that matter. Although women haven't been valued or criticized based on certain essences that would identify them as women⁴³, the talk surrounding their political involvement brought references to the differences (most of which constructed) between men and women that could contribute to the improvement of political representation and to the implicit improvement of the quality of representation. Such differences originate in the social construction that describes women as being closer to household management, but also to people as well, thus supporting a possible political career. Even more, such references are

³⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, Diana Bolcu și Delia Verdeș (trad.), *Al doilea sex*, (București: Univers, 1998), 289 – 290;

³⁹ Also see the feminist criticism on the transformation of women into sex objects and the mass-media's role in the promotion of antifeminism and of post-feminism. For more details see Mihalea Miroiu, *Drumul către autonomie (The road to autonomy)*, (Iași: Polirom, 2004), 73 – 79;

⁴⁰ I'm talking here mainly about the invisibility of domestic labor.

⁴¹ Unlike the findings of Alain Touraine, trad. Magda Jeanrenaud, *Lumea femeilor (Women's world)*, (București: Art, 2007), 119;

⁴² Interview 22 (M.C.), Hunedoara, 41 years old;

⁴³ It is interesting that many speeches have developed around the concept of autonomy, of choice – women should be what they chose to be: mothers, career women, army women, women politicians, wives, etc. Also, the simple fact of being a woman is not valued per se, rather performances and competences are what counts.

connected to the problem of women's representation and interests being included on the public agenda, but mostly to the issue of gender representation. The weak representation of women's interest by men is implicitly adopted from such a stand on the issue, since men are incapable of managing public funding because they don't have the experience of managing their own households, something women do frequently. But the potentiality of such an understanding of reality, in terms of understanding actions meant to counterbalance the above mentioned disadvantages is defused by the poorly associated image of action in the public sphere. This translates to the adoption of an observer position and in the continuation of exploiting "the paths already taken" when talking about the representation of interest, such as using the help of family or friends, meaning becoming isolated in the apolitical domestic sphere.

7. Conclusions – the paradox of the differences that matter

The women interviewed in Hunedoara give minute details about their difficulties, while talking with the pragmatism of everyday life and starting from the assumption that politics cannot help them satisfy their needs and strongly believe that politics is still a field dominated by men, this being the cause for their lack of representation, by using the simple logic of presence – that formula through which experiences become relevant and through which one is attempting to harmonize ideas, the experiential construct of differences and the representation of the thus generated interests⁴⁴.

In the end, we are talking about women who don't go into politics mainly because of the pragmatism with which they have to balance everyday life and career, traditional gender roles and the difficulties of everyday life, but who want their interests to be represented, who believe in their political representation and who believe that their peers could do a great job at this.

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⁴⁴Anne Philips, *Feminism and Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1998), pg 7.

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