

Women's Activism in Romania-An Overview

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Romania, today the largest Balkan country, has undergone profound changes in gender norms and relations since its founding as a state in 1864. Until 1932 most women were second-class citizens, and suffrage for the entire female population came with the communist takeover after 1944.

Gender emancipation was a goal of the communist regime, but women remained relegated to the double work day, even as they gained more opportunities for education and economic power.

As a member of the European Union since 2007, Romania has grudgingly acceded to EU principles of gender mainstreaming in public policy and gender parity on electoral lists. Women remain a disproportionately economically and socially vulnerable population both in cities and rural areas.

The Pre-Communist Period

Women in what is today Romania began organizing through a variety of interest groups at least since the 19th century, initially around religious denominations and eventually into educational and political groupings.

An overview of this complex and shifting landscape is beyond the scope of this brief narrative, which will focus on the attempts of groups to represent the interests and needs of various categories of women after 1864, when Romania became a state.

From the start, women's movements were split along class, religious and ethnic/racial lines. Women from elite families who wanted to encourage their daughters to engage in educational activities beyond traditional ideas of wifehood and motherhood led the way in organizations that advocated for better educational opportunities for girls.

While the state mandated education for all children, officials consistently failed to enforce it and to budget sufficient resources to bring girls into the classroom. Women's literacy rate, especially in rural areas, continued to lag until the Communist shift in state investment in and enforcement of literacy policy.

Roma women suffered further debilitating indignities over the 550 years of enslavement that ended officially in 1864. Ioana Rudareasa (mid-19th century), who sued her owners successfully for the liberation of herself and her children, is a prominent example of their struggle for personhood and dignity.

Feminist organizations focused on better access to teacher training for women, although along ethnic and religious lines. Ethnic Romanians who were Christian Orthodox were favored over all other ethno-racial and religious groups.

Two prominent examples are those of Alexandrina Cantacuzino (1876-1944) and Elena Meissner (1867-1940).

Both women, one in Bucharest and the other in Iasi (Romania's second largest city and its capital between 1916 and 1918), led non-governmental organizations that trained young women to become future teachers.

The National Orthodox Society of Romanian Women, headed by Cantacuzino, provided support specifically for ethnically Romanian and Christian Orthodox women, who were then placed into both private and eventually state educational institutions.

Women with an interest in social justice and gender equality gravitated towards the socialist movement, with Sofia Nadejde (1856-1946) as the most prominent example. Nadejde was a writer and activist in the Socialist Democratic party and a staunch suffragist. She was consistently marginalized by other feminists, like Cantacuzino and Meissner.

Yet Nadejde was the one feminist who took on the challenge to criticize one of the most prominent public intellectuals and politicians of the time, Titu Maiorescu (1840-1917), on the question of women's purported inferior intellectual potentialities in relation to their brain size.

Nadejde provided tremendous publicity and excellent intellectual support for the feminist cause, but those who might have been allies refused to support her personally and individually, or patronizingly praised her while excluding her from conferences, organizations, and feminist alliances.

One telling example comes from Izabela Sadoveanu (1870-1941), an interwar feminist with eugenicist leanings, who described Nadejde as "always simple like a child, full of common sense like a peasant healthy in body and mind, personal, passionate, and excessive like a true feminine type in all its manifestations."

The quote says more about Sadoveanu's understanding of what it meant to be female and peasant — a perspective indebted as much to the biopolitics of Romanian eugenics as to her feminist ideals.

Women from minoritized groups, such as the Roma, never found an open door. After 1918, when Romania doubled in size but the proportion of ethnic Romanians who were Orthodox Christians declined from 90%+ to around 70%, Cantacuzino made it very clear to German, Serbian, Hungarian and Jewish women's groups that they had the duty to "fall in line" in terms of what the Romanian state was willing to do for minorities.

While she claimed to represent all women's interests through her feminist organization and in transnational spaces, like the Little Entente of Women, Cantacuzino never invited non-Orthodox women in her organization as anything but followers. She never opened a space for minoritized women to make a case for specific ideas regarding education, employment, healthcare, or any other public policy that affected women.

Cantacuzino was not unusual for her time; but she was also someone who presented her work as progressive and inclusive, misrepresenting both her own ideas and the problems women experienced in Romania.

Transylvanians voted to join Romania on December 1st, 1918. Full legal equality for men and women was a condition for that union. When the state reneged, Cantacuzino and other feminists called this out and continued to work for reforming the Civil Code, only succeeding in 1932. But they did so hitching their wagon to exclusionary ethno-racial nationalism.

The Communist Period

This legacy of division continued after 1945, although it remained largely invisible until 1989. The

state socialist regime proclaimed its commitment to gender equality in the constitution, Family Code and other legislation. As an atheist state, communist Romania permitted some religious organizations and communities to continue to function, while criminalizing others, such as the Greek Orthodox denomination.

In the first generation, the communist regime succeeded in eliminating illiteracy and growing paid employment opportunities for women to an unprecedented level.

By the late 1960s the state socialist regime became more concerned with controlling the productive and reproductive forces that it had sought to mobilize in the previous two decades. While women's organizations continued to exist, their ability to speak critically about crucial issues, such as reproductive choice, was curtailed.

The Communist Party, even knowing that it had a huge gender deficit in terms of support (fewer than 25% of the membership was female), passed a brutal anti-abortion law in 1967 that led to more than 10,000 dying from backstreet abortions and thousands of children being abandoned in state institutions with inhumane conditions. A large number of those children later died of malnutrition and other forms of physical and psychological abuse while in the custody of the state.

The decriminalization of abortion and access to safe forms of contraception became a unifying force for Romanian women, as well as many men. The legalization of abortion was the second law passed in January 1990, after the bloody end of the communist regime in December 1989.

From Communism to EU Membership

Access to abortion continues to have near universal support across all other divisions in Romanian society, even as women's movements have become more diverse and divided since 1990. Many women have sought to become involved in the multi-party system, though few have been embraced and promoted by their own parties. Legislation around gender mainstreaming, imposed with pressure from the European Union, has led to more women candidates appearing on electoral lists, but more often than not as "throw away" candidates that would enable the party to comply with legislation.

The proportion of women elected in parliament is 17%, with some growth since 1990, but nowhere near gender parity. Other post-communist countries have seen less growth (e.g. Czechia, Hungary), while others resemble the Romanian trend more closely (e.g. Bulgaria). Even as women elected have occasionally come together to publicly criticize gross misogyny among their colleagues, no women's caucus or alliances across party lines have emerged to raise issues such as protection against domestic violence.

A few issues have fragmented women's movements. LGBTQI+ rights in Romania remain poorly addressed and few politicians or thinkers (of any gender) have spoken publicly and consistently in support of full equality for all people and opposition to gender-based discrimination and outright violence.

A constitutional amendment to define marriage to be exclusively between a man and a woman was defeated in 2018. But same sex couples gained equal rights only after the European Court of Human Rights ruled in favor of a gay Romanian couple.

The treatment of trans persons in Romania has not been an issue of much interest for most women's movements. With the exception of informal anarchist groups and a few other small feminist groups, women's organizations have either been quiet, transphobic in their statements, or at most stating their support for trans rights without much effort to publicly align themselves with these issues.

The wedge between the trans communities in Romania and cis-women's groups has been only growing since the EU has tied continued funding for some projects to addressing trans-exclusionary policies. These policies include having a third gender on official identification and granting the right of trans persons to change their legal name and gender on documents.

Romani women have also remained rather isolated from many women's groups, often marginalized on the basis of racist presumptions. Some affirmative action programs focusing on education and economic empowerment have helped advance the presence and ideas of Romani feminists. But at this point many are finding themselves still marginalized on the basis of either race (in relation to Romanian women) or gender (in relation to Romani men), not unlike U.S. Black feminists until the early 1990s.

Roma women continue to have a significantly lower rate of literacy than ethnic Romanian ones (72% vs. 100%), below that of Roma women's counterparts in all other post-communist countries in Europe. This difference correlates strongly with lower rates of participation in paid employment: 28% for Roma women, in contrast to 52% of ethnic Romanian women. These differentials translate into economic and social vulnerability that is far greater for Roma women.

Intersectional alliances across these lines are starting to emerge only now. Organizations such as E-Romnja are working to establish alliances through a queer of color critique.

By the same token, radical right-wing movements are making women some of their most prominent spokespersons. This may be a strategic response to similar trends in the United States and in Western Europe, but it is also a legacy of Romanian women's movements from the interwar period, when eugenics found enthusiastic supporters among educated ethnic Romanian women.

In the past two decades some activism brought women together. The defeat of the 2018 referendum on the definition of the family happened in part because of women's grassroots mobilization.

Environmental activism, especially around deforestation and mining, grew to a significant extent because of women's activism and feminist networks that took to the streets.

Filia, a feminist NGO established in 2000, has helped draw attention to domestic violence and other forms of gender discrimination, working as an ally with other NGOs that focus their attention on eliminating discrimination against vulnerable populations. Among others, they have worked with ACCEPT, the largest and most active LGBTQIA advocacy NGO in Romania.

Alongside these efforts, anarcho-feminism became an active underground movement in Timisoara starting in 1991. Their radical critique of liberal feminism has helped shape a more diverse language around questions of gender norms and has opened up spaces for alternative expressions of gender.

Sexual violence and especially domestic violence have seen growing attention in the media and policy makers. Pressure from below by women's groups succeeded in Romania ratifying the Istanbul Convention in 2016.

Women's groups have been essential since then for the implementation and critiques of government (in)action. The rape and murder of a 15-year-old girl four years ago led to repeated protests and further pressure to address sexual violence with greater seriousness. However no long-term institutions or networks have developed to leverage these different voices.

What these various strands of women's activism will bring into the future remains unclear. Compared to the huge losses suffered by U.S. women after the SCOTUS Dobbs decision in June 2022, one might view Romania's situation as better than in the United States.

Huge disparities among women in Romania continue to exist across religious, sexual, class, and racial lines. However, this also means that there are also great opportunities for addressing gender violence and discrimination. Listening carefully, understanding common interests, and using one's privilege to address these systemic problems is the challenge for the future.

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