

## WOMEN LEADERS AND LEAD WORKERS IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA: A DISCOURSIVE APPROACH<sup>1</sup>

Petruța Teampău  
**Babes-Bolyai University**  
 teampau@fspac.ro

### Abstract

In this paper, we use discourse analysis to investigate “Femeia” (1965-1980), the official media outlet of the National Council of Women and also spokesmen for the Communist Party’s requirements and decisions regarding women; the aim is to frame the portrait of the “female leader”, the skills and qualities required, in the context of an intense politicized campaign of “promoting women”. While for many women waged work represented the promise of a better life, a new identity, along with the more visible improvements, “Femeia” tried to advertise these new identities by presenting successful stories of women who fulfilled their potential. What the magazine rarely wrote, while showing women achieving their multiple roles, was just how difficult, exhausting and depressing this juggling was in real life.

Shortly after the end of WWII, in Romania, with the new Electoral Law nr. 560/July 15, 1946, women received for the first time full electoral rights, to vote and be elected same as men. Unfortunately, what could have been a historical moment for women’s movement was in fact meaningless at a time when elections became less and less of a democratic game. At the beginning of 1946, a democratic federation of women (FDRF) was created (Ciuca, 2010: 74) and in the following decades women were called upon to contribute to the reconstruction of the country. Despite their massive mobilisation and absorption into workforce, women have remained just “propaganda object and inessential actors in the socialist transformation of the country” (Ciuca, 2010: 74).

At first, women’s advancement and promotion in the public life passed as emancipation; post-war Romania was a mostly agrarian country, with a poor and largely illiterate population. On the brink of modernization and

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industrialization, the increasing need for labor was partially resolved by absorbing women into the work force (Miroiu 2007). This socio-political movement was backed up by an emergent discourse about equality of all citizens, the importance of education, and the ‘unprecedented’ social, cultural and political development. “Scholars of socialism have demonstrated that gender was an important organizing principle of the state, instrumental in the construction of policy and propaganda and in the refashioning of public and private spaces. For example, although women were legally recognized as men’s equals, protective legislation restricted women from participating in certain jobs, and gender-specific family policies—such as maternity leave—reinforced rather than challenged essentialist notions of gender. At the same time, gender was not simply manipulated and mobilized by the state to increase production (and in some cases, reproduction) and secure legitimacy, but was also a basic lens—along with other identities—through which individuals interpreted, negotiated, resisted, and, in some cases, ignored state policies and discourses” (Penn, Massino, 2009: 3)

As the necessities of the new regime became more defined, the female sex roles were also tailored to the interests of the state. The special relationship between the state and its ‘daughters’ was certainly a function of the evolution of the interests of the state concerning its citizens, not of the changing position and status of women inside socialist society. The real meaning of the “emancipation” of women - argues Stefania Mihalache - is to “organize the feminine force in a fight for the cause of socialism, disguised as a movement of emancipation [...] Visibly women are organized on the modal of pyramid, similar to that of P.C.R., but separated from its structure”. Thus, women become “fighters in the carnival of a disguised cause” (Ciuca, 2010: 75).

Women’s emancipation as one of the pillars of the modernizing project of socialism was, for women themselves, an illusion and for the Party a discursive stratagem; the “emancipation” was social, not sexual, political, not individual, public, and not private. The feminist slogan “personal is political” was reinterpreted by communist propaganda in a cynical manner. Women were advised to take care of themselves as a social duty, for the enjoyment of others, not for personal pleasure, to have children for the future and benefit of the nation and to raise them accordingly in the safe environment of the communist family, the very building block of the socialist society. Miroiu points out that “communism left family patriarchy untouched. In spite of the new label for gender relations, ‘work and life

comrades', there was not even a vague official idea of a domestic partnership" (Miroiu 2007: 200). Moreover, the so called „work comradeship" proved itself to be marked by state patriarchy and implicitly, by gender inequalities. Women as workers and contributors to the creation of "the new man" were, despite the propagandistic discourse, less valued as they worked in the so called "light industry", in comparison to men who were engaged in "heavy industry", the latter being considered one of the most important pillar of communist industry. This hierarchy of work value is easily identified by the differences of resources allocated to feminized domains in contrasts to masculinized ones and this hierarchy was perpetuated also throughout the post-communist period (Pasti, 2003, Miroiu, 2004).

As a matter of fact, Penn and Massino argue that post-World War II political leaders in Eastern Europe "officially subscribed to the notion of 'women's liberation through work' as theorized by Friedrich Engels and other early socialist thinkers. According to this reasoning, women's participation in paid labor would facilitate their economic autonomy, which would allow them greater control over their lives. In turn, men's recognition of women as equal workers would abolish patriarchal attitudes and practices as they played out both at work and at home" (Penn and Massino, 2009: 3). Ceausescu himself declares, after the infamous Plenary of the Central Committee of P.C.R. (June 18-19, 1973), which paves the way for his wife, Elena's ascension in politics, that "in our socialist society, women occupy an important role; they have been bring and they bring an important contribution in all fields of activity, their work and creation are incorporated in everything that we have realized and that we are realizing. [...] Considering that women represent 51% of the total population, that means that we cannot even conceive or speak about managing the developing plan of the country without the active participation of women to the social life" (Ceausescu, 1973: 646). In the same speech, he insists that women's problem should be seen as strictly a social problem: "If we speak about creating conditions for a full equality between the sexes, that means that we have to treat all people not as women and men, but in their quality as party members, of citizens, that we judge exclusively by the work they do" (Ceausescu, 1973: 646).

Despite its powerful rhetoric and message, this official egalitarian discourse only added to the "ideological and political incoherencies of the communist power concerning women's social status", as Heinen suggested. Among

these incoherencies, the author names “constitutions founded on an egalitarian model [that] coexisted with specific laws and practices that reinforced a gendered model. Although the official policy pretended to emancipate women through work and through the socialization of education and childcare, it appeared incapable of reaching such goals. The logic of measures adopted to disguise the deficiencies in the social field (concerning childcare services among others) such as childcare leave, leave to care for sick children, etc., aimed above all at encouraging women to reconcile occupational and domestic tasks. In contradiction with the initial project, this orientation meant stressing women's roles as mothers and asking them explicitly to take care of children and dependent persons” (Heinen, 1997: 579). In broad terms, the same discourse that promoted the image of the woman worker, also promoted the woman as a mother and wife, responsible for child-rearing and domestic work. However, the propagandistic discourse has its own subtleties and strategies that can only be revealed through a meticulous analysis.

### **Women’s magazines during communism**

In this paper, we use discourse analysis to investigate “Femeia”, the official media outlet of the National Council of Women and also spokesmen for the Party’s requirements and decisions regarding women, a magazine which Massino calls “an obviously politically involved source for the iconographical construction of the gendered feminine identity” (Massino, 2004: 4). As the editors put it: “<<Femeia>> sees it as an honour to fight with perseverance and all responsibility for increasing the role of women in the economic, political and social life of the country, for mobilising all women from the cities and the villages to participate in the fulfilling of the party’s politics. Our entire effort will be dedicated to the multilateral education of women – producers of material and spiritual goods, women as mothers, educators of the young generations – for obtaining new achievements that would only confirm, once again, the highest virtues and qualities the define women in socialist Romania” (Jan. 1977).

The broad aim of our work is to define the ideal of the communist female citizen (as woman, mother, wife and worker), depicted by propaganda; however, this paper is focused on describing the portrait of the “female leader”, the skills and qualities required, in the context of an intense politicized campaign of “promoting women” (1965-1980). In the mid-70’s, the magazine enjoyed a permanent section under the header “The promotion of women is not a favor but a right” (“Promovarea femeilor nu este o favoare, ci un drept”) where stories of successful women were

presented, as “good practices”. Although the tone of the coverage was obviously propagandistic and politicized, the stories of “real” women brought it closer to the public and encouraged the readers to identify themselves with those women. Even if “Femeia” always struggled to publish reports about successful women who met the requirements of the Party (good workers, mothers and wives) and presented them with full name and pictures, the stories were so perfect and the characters so faultless that they seemed fictionalized (and sometimes they were plainly invented by Femeia’s journalists, for that matter). The successful Viorica or Lenuta could have been any Viorica or Lenuta from any factory throughout the country. Their trajectories were always the same: from working in the factory, at the bottom of the hierarchy, from an early age, making their way up through honest and diligent work. Consequently, presenting successful stories failed somehow to portray individuals, but rather potentialities: this particular Viorica might be you, the reader! By failing to individualize persons, these stories only added to the general anonymity of women during communism. Women were spoken of as either “the millions of women in our country” or with the singular but generalizable “the woman” (femeia).

Jill Massino discusses the problem of the “anonymity” of women in the communist representations of the 80s. While “depersonalizing the individual is a trademark of totalitarian art, in order to minimize individual differences and hide social, racial and/or sexual inequalities”, the communist woman is represented as rather an “allegory with abstract qualities than a live being. [...] As part of the ideological apparatus, these images, a mixture of social realism and nationalist kitsch, were constructed to show reality as it was supposed to be, not as it was” (Massino, 2004: 7). A special feminine image was that of the peasant, which simbolizes “the traditional connection between sufferance, sacrifice and woman’s identity” (Massino, 2004: 11). In fact, these features will be very important in the construction of the feminine identity, including the one assumed by women. As Demeny shows, “in a society in which the values of community are considered more important, in which the individual itself does not have any values, subordination does not cause protests, but takes the form of self-sacrifice for the interest for others (family, community, nation) and most of the times becomes a kind of a virtue” (Demeny, in Cosma et al., 2002: 276).

Massino also suggest that women were invisible both as workers and as mothers, while there was only one woman who focused the entire visibility: the leader's wife, Elena Ceausescu (Massino, 2004: 15). In a cynical manner, women's anonymity in visual representations pertains to their general anonymity in real life of women, "helpless victims of socialist policies" and never citizens with their own subjectivity and agency (Massino, 2004: 21).

Nevertheless, true to its propagandistic role, *Femeia* presented a different image, one of a woman of many qualities and huge energy, all in the service of the Party: "Communist women's magazines tried to produce and impose the image of a hard-working, almost asexual activist, for whom the man is just a comrade and marriage only a framework within which she performs her main duties towards the Party. For this ideal comrade, love, pleasure and fashion are just capitalist lures, as her entire being is dedicated to one goal only: building the communist society" (Oprea, 2015: 285). As Oprea appropriately underlines, "women's magazines from the communist bloc were essential tools in the regimes' endeavor to impose new models of womanhood within an ideally gender-neutral society. They rejected the 'bourgeois' model of the home-centered, male-dependent, passive feminine subject. They promoted the image of an assertive and determined female comrade and activist, occupying the same jobs and positions as men and participating in the same measure in the building of the communist society. This model often lead to conflicting roles, such as the one between the 'citizen-worker' and the 'mother-worker'. The origins of these contradictions were to be found in the very inconsistencies underlying the communist ideologies and practices regarding women, work, family and maternity" (Oprea, 2015: 285). Needless to say, the propaganda did not bother to clarify how these requirements were to be fulfilled in real life, a life which was anything but easy for women. In fact, "accounts of women's lives reveal that they did not feel emancipated (Sariban, 1984). They recount feeling exhausted and guilty, exhausted from working an average of six more hours a week than men, and guilty because they were unable to fulfill any of their roles adequately. Women had what is commonly referred to as the triple shift or burden, working for paid employment, performing the majority of domestic duties (which increased substantially during periods of shortages by having to stand in long queues for basic goods), and participating as social activists. Bulgarian women described all of this responsibility with the saying "It is difficult and

hazardous to carry three watermelons under one arm” (Petrova, 1993: 23)” (LaFont, 2001: 205).

In the pages of *Femeia*, women smile, tired but happy, in pictures with their children (especially in the 70’s) or at their workplace, in work outfits, with dirty hands and faces. They never complain, never feel overwhelmed and always express their deep gratitude to the Party and its leader for providing the conditions for their new lives. “Pictures of women in hard hats, women technicians, and women doctors supported the illusion that women in the communist countries had, indeed, been liberated. Yet, rather than experiencing complete emancipation, communist women were forced into pseudo-emancipation mainly because their labor was needed for communist industrial development (LaFont, 1998). The importance of women’s role as the producers of future workers was recognized, while at the same time state ideology encouraged women’s participation in the labor force and deprived housewifery of status (Korovushkina, 1994). Work was a duty, not a right, and low wages necessitated both wives’ and husbands’ incomes for family survival” (LaFont, 2001: 205). What the magazine never wrote, while showing women fulfilling their multiple roles, was just how difficult, exhausting and depressing this juggling was in real life.

In real life, “precommunist patriarchy remained intact, with women shouldering the burden of economic and domestic labor. Instead of truly liberating women, state communism turned into a system that doubly exploited women in their roles as producers and reproducers. Their official glorification, represented in propaganda and the numerous statues of strong women proletarians standing beside their male counterparts, unfortunately, did not reflect the reality of women’s lives (Peto, 1994)” (LaFont, 2001: 205).

Still, on a positive note, it is also true that for many women waged work represented the promise of a better life, a new identity, along with the more visible improvements. As recent research shows, during communist period, work represented an important component of women gender identity and citizenship (Bucur, Miroiu, 2015, forthcoming). As Massino points out, “whether the benefits were economic self-sufficiency, access to social services, freedom from strict, patriarchal codes of behavior, intellectual fulfillment, and/or the opportunity for social engagement, working outside the home significantly shaped the course of women’s lives under socialism.

In addition, work offered women alternative identities as workers, agitators, and equal socialist citizens, and thus new ways of imagining their lives" (Massino, 2009: 30).

All of these identities were presented and advertised in the pages of *Femeia*, with different emphasis in different periods. In following the Party lines thoroughly, *Femeia* changed in time, with visible makeovers in discourse and layout. Oprea describes five phases can be identified in the magazine's existence up to 1989: "(a) 1946-1960: hard communist propaganda; (b) 1960-1965: softer communist propaganda; 11 (c) 1966-1971/1972: cosmopolitanism; (d) 1973-1978/1979: softer communist propaganda; (e) 1980-1989: hard communist propaganda" (Oprea, 2015: 285).

In the early 60's, although the decade is marked by the publication of the Decree 770 which banned abortions, the magazine still has a "Western" allure, its content seems slightly politicized and the images published enjoy an almost erotic appeal. However, "while *Femeia's* content and design were cosmopolitan, the model of the 'Eternal Feminine' it promoted was quite paradoxical. On the one hand, in line with the official discourse, there was a modern call for emancipation and equality with men, as both men and women were urged to build the multi-developed socialist society. On the other hand, the way the women were represented remained very close to the traditional values associated with femininity, like intimacy, concern about the way they look, being a support for men. In a rather naive way, women represented in the magazine displayed a touch of elegance and sophistication, of freedom and of sexual seduction - that is, of an inner world the Party had not laid hold of, as yet. These characteristics of femininity would be progressively removed during the next two phases" (Oprea, 2015: 287).

Jill Massino also noticed the "glamorization of the female laborer" in the second half of the decade. "While heroine workers remained a feature of the socialist legitimating myth when Ceausescu assumed power in 1965, a shift occurred in the visual representation of women workers. Whereas, under Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, images of burly tractor drivers and plain-looking textile workers were the norm, after Ceausescu took power, images of female laborers became increasingly beautified and glamorous. The glamorization of the female laborer signified a new stage of socialism. Like the cosmetics and fashionable dresses advertised in department stores and magazines, the glamorous, modern worker signified progress without sacrifice" (Massino, 2009: 19). However, with the criminalization of

abortion in 1966, “women’s public identity was reformulated: motherhood, like work, became a civic duty and women were evaluated according to their productive as well as reproductive output” (Massino, 2009: 19).

### **The communist woman in the pages of *Femeia***

One can say that, roughly, “during the communist period, the female ideal was constituted as a heroic mother and worker, both a revolutionary and a state bureaucrat, which were regarded as key elements in the processes of industrial development and production. She was portrayed as physically strong and with rugged rather than feminized attributes (Andreescu, Shapiro, 2015: 2). However, a detailed analysis of the magazine *Femeia* reveals a more sophisticated and complex image.

One of the mantras repeated in the official discourse was that *anyone working with passion and skills can climb the hierarchical ladder of society* (*Femeia*, June 1977). In theory, at least. In reality, there was a cumulus of qualities, skills, and experience required. *What are the qualities required of a leader? Combining the professional, the political and the administrative skills. Besides the responsibility there should be a great need to give, to be a model for others from all points of view. Also, that person better have a normal family life, to have children, precisely to be able to understand life in all its complexity* (*Femeia*, Feb. 1977). Not an easy task. Thus, working in a leading position entailed mastering all the domains of life, private and public, possessing specific qualities: *...earnestness and competence, passion and diligence* (*Femeia*, May 1979), but also being able to allocate resources, especially time, for preparation.

*Working in a leading position requires knowledge, skills, experience, a fluid, daring, revolutionary way of thinking. Some of these features are formed in the daily practice, other are acquired through study* (*Femeia*, Jan. 1977). Women were also often blamed for not finding the resources to study, in between their daily time-consuming chores. If they did not, they surely had a time management problem that needed to be solved. *Some women prefer to remain in the shadow, because, after all, it is more convenient. A diploma and a cozy job, where one is not required to think too much, but just a certain routine...* (*Femeia*, June 1977).

In reality, things were a lot more complex and had to do with the specificities of the process through which women were attracted in the labor force. Women fail to be promoted because *they do not meet all the*

*requirements to be proposed for foreman courses: vocational school, seniority, categorization of in the highest retribution. Most senior workers were qualified in the workplace, doing easy, repetitive operations, earning less but being content about it. They did not dare take the exam for earning a category because then they would have had to go to physics and electricity classes which they do not understand. Three decades ago some of them have just learnt the alphabet (Femeia, Apr. 1977).*

To be promoted, women should make themselves noticed through hard work and combativeness, be leading workers and role models for others (especially younger colleagues), earn the respect of co-workers and be good professionals. *Women's committees should recommend for promotion the most capable women, examples in work and family life, with a substantial professional experience, preoccupied with their political as well as professional training, women with personality, combative (Femeia, Feb. 1977).*

As mentioned above, the success stories follow almost the same plot, as if the "heroine" is a single role played by any woman up to the task. The story is presented in simple and few details, as if to suggest that those are just necessary landmarks of a destiny that has to be lived out: *One can say it is a typical biography. At 16 she gets hired at "Suveica", gets a qualification, works, becomes a lead worker, than a Party member, the secretary of the UTC organization of the factory, after a while she attends the one year ideological training, graduates with a straight 10 and is assigned as instructor at the propaganda unit of C.C. of P.C.R., travels through the country until she gets married and the baby comes. Other graduates of the Academy have had the same trajectory, from workers to activists" (Femeia, Jan. 1977).*

Although one might think that these are the qualities of any leader, the portrait of the woman aspiring to a leading position is subtly gendered. On one hand, these women are always under suspicion of being too womanly as leaders (being impartial, gossiping, taking sides or simply being too "weak" for the task): *How do they manage when they become 'the boss', these women who get promoted? We fight for promotion, for their hierarchical upgrade, but once they are the leaders of a collectivity – and still lacking the exercise of leading – do they know how to impose themselves in the best manners? To not be subjective? To manage their little personal inputs? (Femeia, Jan. 1977).*

On the other hand, women are expected to contribute their "feminine" nature to leadership, to use their social skills and nurturing impetus for improving their leading capacities: *Women participate in leadership not only*

*with their head, with their luggage of knowledge accumulated in schools and enriched in practice, but also with the heart, with an eagerness and dedication typical to their spirituality (Femeia, Apr. 1977). Moreover, in all the description of these "heroines" there is something that reminds us of their femininity which is supposed to smooth the edges of a too ambitious nature. Her character, as well as her abilities of future leader were formed and crystallized in the process – not always easy – of working. She is not a tough woman – on the contrary. She is a woman with a warm and balanced voice, fierce with what she plans to do, correct, honest with herself and others, relentless when it comes to lying, truancy or stealing. And fair (Femeia, Sept. 1977). Sometimes, the explicit gendered reference is to maternity; more often than not, the relationship of the "heroine" to her colleagues is one of a mother to her children. Twenty-five years in which this young and vital woman (she joined the factory at 15), with a tonic smile on her harmonious face, has raised 'as a mother', as she says, a family with tens and hundreds of girls, which have learnt from her not only the profession, but also this incomparable feeling of human dignity (Femeia, Apr. 1977).*

Most portraits combine the features of a feminine looking character with the qualities of a good leader (communication skills, social abilities, energy, ambition, fairness): *Behind her feminine appearance, she hides an energetic, fierce nature, who does not give up easily, who is not scared of the muds from the construction sites and of the harsh language. Lucia knows how to impose order, discipline, to find collaborators and to act together (Femeia, Apr. 1977). Many coverages in the pages of Femeia describe female leaders as being respected (or feared) for their fairness and discipline, both in "production" and in the social interactions with people they lead; these leaders are best described by their ...dedication, diligence, administrative skills, order and discipline, a passionate competition with the others and with ourselves (Femeia, Apr. 1977). The often mentioned "ambition" and "competitiveness" pertain to the fact that most women felt that their promotion was more like a test, that they had to prove worthy of this honor and to respond to this entrustment of the Party with greater responsibility. Most women, however, felt motivated and empowered by this entrustment and wanted to give their best. As one activist puts it, in political activism it is not usual to look at the watch, to see if it is time to go home. [...] If you really must know, I do not feel tired, for everything I do captivates me (Femeia, June 1977). Florentina Andreescu explains this phenomenon: "within Romanian communism, the individual's desire is linked to the development of the industrializing socialist state. Satisfaction of desire in this case is realized through the power of the state. By being a*

part of the system, by becoming a worker hero, the individual shares the system's power" (Andreescu, 2014: 58).

### **Conclusive remarks**

Women's "emancipation" in communist Romania was anything but emancipatory; nevertheless, it offered women some incentives and conditions to aspire to a new status. Among these we should mention "legal guarantees of women's equality, greater access to education, the easing of cultural and/or religious mores which inhibited women's economic and political activities, hence increasing opportunities in the public sphere, property and inheritance rights, child allowances, state-sponsored child care, lengthy maternity leaves, and guaranteed return employment after maternity leaves (Verdery, 1994; Dakova, 1995)" (LaFont, 2001: 206). Truth be told, these social entitlements "theoretically attempted, but failed, to reconcile women's roles as producers and reproducers. Women who placed their children in state-run childcare institutions were considered "bad" mothers, while women who juggled job and family were considered "bad" workers because their domestic responsibilities made them unreliable employees" (LaFont, 2001: 206).

Women's emancipation failed in communist Romania because, although it "promised to liberate women through increased opportunities in education, employment, and political representation", it never undertook the problem of patriarchy. As literature shows, "women experienced a dual patriarchy; private patriarchy in the domestic domain and public patriarchy in civil life. The *Party*, which defined the role of women, promoted patriarchy disguised as equality. Pro-natalist and anti-natalist policies reflected demographic and labor force needs. Social policies reinforced women's roles in the domestic domain as housekeepers responsible also for child care. The communist governments alternatively postponed or ignored answering the question of women's real equality at work and at home (Eisenstein, 1996)" (LaFont, 2001: 217).

Unfortunately, these developments have repercussions in the post-communist period also, in term of women's mobilization and participation in the public sphere. Suzanne LaFont argues bluntly that "many post-communist women view participation in politics as just one more burden" (LaFont, 2001: 208). Looking back on the communist period, LaFont claims that "women were guaranteed representation when representation was little more than a formality, and now that the political arena is being empowered, they are being poorly represented" (LaFont, 2001: 209). In

Romania, women continue to have a problematic and fragile presence in the public sphere, one which is still tainted by the communist past; furthermore, the heritage of the so-called “emancipation” could not be translated into a firm and strong voice for women in the new democracy.

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