

Abstract

In my paper I am to examine gender as a continually spiraling helix, made up of gradually but very slowly changing beliefs, expectations, norms, shaped by political interests spreading or maintaining ignorance and/or fear. We will look at how these beliefs are shaped in Romanian post-communist society, and offer some perspectives on how we might get to a more inclusive gender diverse culture in Romania.

Key words: beliefs, gender politics, gender culture, gender diversity acceptance in Ro

Foreword

In this foreword, we aim to introduce readers to an atmosphere, the one from which we approach the main subject of our article: personal beliefs, what shapes them and how, what mechanisms and elements of belief-shaping can/should be influenced for effective social change. Our grounding for the views and ideas expressed below is more of an activist, than an academic one. Hence, we are bending some academic writing norms and hope no offence is taken by academic readers.

To introduce you to the premises of our approach, we have selected a few elements of the Romanian 'atmosphere' (society, politics etc) which are relevant to our activist perspective. If you're a social activist, an academic in social science, a journalist with an interest in social issues such as discrimination, diversity or human rights, you are bound to have heard (at least one of) these some time:

Race is a construct

Gender is a construct.

Sexual identity is a construct.

Often what is meant is: 'it's *just* a social construct.'

But constructs are not only *real*. They are also very powerful things.

Romania is widely illiterate when it comes to the idea of constructs, nevermind the idea of personal beliefs as constructs. For that reason, Romania is widely illiterate of notions such as race or gender, which makes it a very racist, sexist and homophobic society/culture.¹ To illustrate the patriarchal and racist machismo of Romanian politics, a

¹ See The European Network Against Racism 2008 Shadow Report, for example:
<http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/national/Romania%20-%20SR%202008.pdf>

few simple fun-facts: Romania is the country where political leaders pass laws to bypass their own criminal records at 2 am - then repeal it, then pass it under a different name²; where the patriarchate is upheld by overtly Orthodox male political leaders/barons, who appoint women as prime ministers because they are sure to not step out of line³; where restriction orders for women beaters and killers are a serious joke⁴; where a national referendum costing some 20 million euro is about to take place, at the bequest of a religious alliance backed by foreign evangelical churches, to make same-sex marriage even more impossible than it already is – while, ironically and very possibly shamelessly lying, PSD chief baron announces that, for balance, civil partnerships may become possible⁵; where there is no legal gender recognition - therefore transgender high school students drop out or fail crudely, transgender adults struggle with precarity in all forms, and HRT means giving yourself Testosterone shots/taking whatever birth control pills you can afford, without medical supervision; where walls are still built to separate the Roma settlement from the rest of the town or village; where people with addictions are ignored, abused or kicked out by the staff of medical or public institutions where they've gone to ask for help, probably after mustering all the strength and courage they still had, because they had hit rock-bottom; where a national sex ed program was advanced as a legislative initiative by a coalition of very solid youth and health organizations after two years of very serious work, only to be flunked with the old 'this would not be fitting with our old orthodox values' argument – though we are the top of European charts as far as teenage pregnancies are concerned, and STD and HIV infection rates have been soaring in the last decade or so.⁶

The victories against corruption or inequality won during the pre-accession period (before 2007) were as monumental as they were illusory in their effects: things have not changed much from the mid-90's when it comes to embracing diversity or protecting minority or women's rights.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/05/romanian-government-scraps-corruption-decree-as-opposition-continues> accessed 7 Apr, 13:34

³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42723492> accessed 14 Apr 15:22

⁴ <http://www.mediafax.ro/social/cum-sunt-aparate-de-lege-femeile-hartuite-15277803> accessed 14 Apr 22:27

⁵ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/referendumul-pentru-familie-probabil-in-mai-in-paralel-cu-legiferarea-parteneriatului-civil-902053> accessed 14 Apr 15:30

⁶ See http://adevarul.ro/news/societate/de-alexandra-nascut-14-ani-efectele-dramatice-absentei-educatiei-sexuale-mii-fete-1_5acb88b4df52022f75a1a57f/index.html unfortunately only available in Romanian.

Some progress has been achieved indeed: dark-skinned or poor-looking people no longer need to bribe police workers or public servants in order for them to be issued an official record to which we are lawfully entitled, or access basic assistance public programs; but few poor Romanians are properly informed about the possibilities to access help, and many continue to be treated as second-class citizens; the Roma now have affirmative action facilities, but they continue to live in slums, and the police continue to profile them. As far as lgbtqia+ rights are concerned, the abolition of article 200 in the Penal Code was indeed a huge but also quite singular feat. This article was the grounds on which gay persons could be sentenced to 3-5 years in jail, based on a simple anonymous notification from anybody. Without the conditions imposed for accession by the EU, we would probably still have this article in the penal code. Just so readers understand how this is not an overstatement, bear in mind the words of parliamentarian Emil Teodor Popescu (Christian-Democratic Party) during parliamentary debates in the late 90's for the modification (since abolition was considered preposterous at the time) of article 200: "incest is preferable to homosexuality, because at least there is a chance for procreation." Human Rights watch and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission published an extensive report on this in 1998.⁷

In writing this paper, our intention is to engage in the conversation a wider range of both academic and non-academic persons involved in transgender or gender equality activism and education, who can contribute substantially, especially persons of diverse identities under the trans umbrella⁸. As we said at the onset, we believe this is better done if we bend some academic writing conventions. We have included in our piece the voices of transgender persons and activists not necessarily as a means of legitimization – although that is also in the books – but more as an invitation and encouragement to other members of the transgender community to come up and speak their mind about a topic that concerns them as much as everybody: what shapes gender-related beliefs and how could

⁷ The report can be consulted online here http://accept-romania.ro/images/stories/scandaluri_publice_orientarea_sexuala_si_legea_penala_in_romania.pdf or requested as a hard copy in English or Romanian from the Accept library, 10 Lirei, Bucharest.

⁸ To get an idea about who is included under the trans umbrella, as well as the different theories related to it, an excellent article here <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/family/public-restrooms-your-privacy-and-safety/who-is-included-in-the-transgender-umbrella> (accessed 14 Apr 18:00)

these be re-shaped so as to eventually have a less transphobic and more inclusive society for gender-diverse people in Romania.

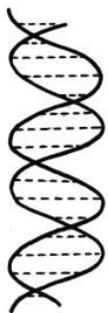
Our methodology for this article includes: reviewing relevant theoretical works, analyzing press and media coverage relevant to our topics, interviews with gender equality activists and members of the transgender community, empirical observations picked up during our 20+ years of ethnic and gender equality activism.

This article is part of the initial stage in a 3-stage project. In the second one we will interview legal professionals (judges, lawyers, prosecutors), politicians, education and public health professionals, policy makers and members of the transgender community again, in hopes to find the correlations between gender politics as policy/law and gender politics as human behavior. We aim to publish the results in May-June 2019, During the 2nd phase of our project we will hopefully manage to coagulate a task-force of governmental and non-governmental parties interested in the third and final part of our intent: putting together and advancing a gender diversity recognition bill by the end of 2021. We are hoping that transgender activism leadership will be well coagulated by then. With the increase in the number of lgbtqia+ organizations and presence in the public space, the gender diversity helix *is* rising – albeit slowly.

Conceptual frame and literature review

When something is socially constructed, the process takes a very long time, hundreds or thousands of years. During this time, they seep into our collective and individual psyches more and more deeply. Without prompting and guidance, most of us never come to realize that what we hold as profoundly intimate beliefs, or other psychological triggers of behavior, attitudes, even emotions, are the reflection of practices and interests that meddle with self-awareness in equally perverse and intrusive ways. But does that make our beliefs false? Anthropologist Jeremy Trombley warns that a construct (race, sexuality, money, morality) should not be dismissed as unrealistic, or unreal – but rather as something real, shaped by history and politics. Without awareness of how much time and effort are needed to shape/modify a construct, social change is not realistically possible:

'[...] the only thing that saying something is socially constructed does is to indicate that it could have been (or could be) constructed differently – that is historically and politically contingent. This is a first step (though maybe not a necessary step) towards creating the possibility for change, but it is not change itself. Social constructions are powerful, deeply embedded structures, and change takes time and work.'⁹



Belief construction can be visually represented perhaps as a helix where each loop is a generation, and/or major historical event. If the loops were coloured, the difference from one loop to the next one would be either non-existent or very subtle. It would take 2-3 loops, even more, for the difference in colour to be evident. The dotted lines could be anything from things relevant only to an individual (like disease, success, loss, travel etc) to war, religious conversion, territorial unification or segmentation, an epidemic, a major shift in the political regime of a country. This image representation is inspired by prof. Daniel Bal-Tal's work, summed up in his excellent *Shared beliefs in a society*.¹⁰

⁹ Jeremy Trombley <http://jmtrom.blogspot.ro/2011/07/social-construction-and-reality.html> accessed 2 Apr 14:00

¹⁰ Bar-Tal, Daniel, *Shared beliefs in a society*, Sage Publications 2000

In 1991 **Bruno Latour** published his 'We Have Never Been Modern' (published in English by Harvard University Press in 1993¹¹), whose major contribution to understanding constructs is excellently and concisely summed up by Levi R. Bryant¹²:

'This, I believe, is Latour's core thesis: society must be built. Society does not explain, but is precisely that which must be explained. And wherever we refer to social forces and the like to explain such and such a phenomenon, we've skipped this step. Under the most charitable interpretation, Latour's point is not that there aren't projections or that there aren't objective forces, but that 1) the form social relations take cannot be completely explained through projections or naturalizations, and 2) that humans cannot be entirely reduced to marionettes of so-called objective forces.'

We will return to this marionette situation later, and connect it with the views held by one of the transgender activists we have spoken to for this article, about how we may address transphobia or racism or other forms of social exclusion in nowadays Romania.

Published in 2015 in the International Journal of Transgenderism, **Thomas Stocks's** piece¹³ on the extent and reasons for transgender rights being underrealized in comparison with those of other groups in the LGBTQIA+ spectrum (in the UK) includes an excellent section on the relationship between heteronormativity, queer theory and human rights and human rights law. The author notes two things which we find very relevant to our discussion on personal beliefs and how they are carved in the process of controlling power. One is that queer theorists (beginning with Foucault) introduced the idea of sexuality as a social construction, which is relevant given the juxtaposition of gender and sex in general conversation, policies – or personal beliefs. We will resume this discussion in more detail below, in relation to our own thesis. Another important aspect in Stocks' article which is of great relevance to our approach to personal beliefs related to gender is related to the correlation between heteronormativity and human rights. Although its existence precedes human rights movements and institutions, heteronormativity was theorized after human rights became a serious matter in national and international

¹¹ Latour, Bruno, We have never been modern, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 142-245

¹² <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2011/06/18/of-quasi-objects-and-the-construction-of-collectives/#more-5032> accessed 2 Apr 15:00

¹³ 'To What Extent Have the Rights of Transgender People Been Underrealized in Comparison to the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer/Questioning People in the United Kingdom?' International Journal of Transgenderism, 16:1, 1-35, DOI: [10.1080/15532739.2015.1007198](https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2015.1007198)

policies. This means that human rights law has actually had an important contribution to maintaining a set of problematic constructs related to the construct of sexuality: gender binaries, gender roles, gender expression, alignment of sex with gender, 'natural' versus pathological aspects related to sex, gender, orientation. Thus, the inception of human rights was inevitably heteronormative.¹⁴ This sadly means that at the time of UDHR, for example, or when the European Court for Human Rights was created, the existing power relations effectively integrated civil/human rights movements – and, in doing so, put some serious brakes on them for the ensuing decades. Homonormativity was for a while, as we said above, just a juxtaposition of heteronormativity, which ironically only consolidated and intensified binary societal pressures – outside and inside the lgbtqia+ community.

Michel Foucault is a household name in modern thought, though not many may be aware of him as a founding father of queer theory - nor as a gay man who died of AIDS in 1984, for that matter. In 1976, Foucault published the first of his four-volume 'The History of Sexuality' (last one published posthumously, in 2018). In this article we will lean heavily on the ideas put forth by Foucault in the first volume, published under a title laden with double entendres: *La Volonte de Savoir*, translated into English as *The Will to Knowledge*. Indeed, the relationship between power and knowledge is Foucault's central point of interest throughout his entire life and work.

Foucault's 'The History' starts by questioning 20th century Western common belief that, beginning with late 17th century until quite well into the 20th, open mention of sexually-related matters was repressed, due to the ascent of the bourgeoisie and capitalism. He calls this the 'repressive hypothesis' and from it he traces the emergence of sexuality as a construct used to control people and power. In the shift of power defined not so much as 'the right to death' (feudal lords could rightfully kill virtually anybody anytime) but more like 'the right to live', modern states now exercise 'biopower', built on the outlook of the human body as a machine – which can and should be disciplined and optimized in the name of 'safety and progress.'

¹⁴ 'An Essentially Private Manifestation of Human Personality: Construction of Homosexuality in the European Court for Human Rights' *Human Rights Law Review*, 10(1)

Some key definitions

I teach gender studies to seniors at a high school in Bucharest. We spend a good month at the beginning of the year clarifying some very basic yet very complex notions, without which moving on would be very awkward, if not impossible. For the sake of disambiguity, we will list them here as the 'basic kit' with which we operate in dissecting gender.

Sex. Biologically speaking, there are 5 elements that determine a person's sex:

- the (presence or absence of a) Y chromosome
- the type of gonads (testes or ovaries)
- the sex hormones (estrogen or testosterone)
- the internal anatomy (presence or absence of a uterus)
- the external genitalia (scrotum and penis versus vulva and vagina).

Lavenda and Schultz define sex as "observable physical characteristics that distinguish the two kinds of human beings, females and males, needed for reproduction"¹⁵.

Sex is therefore perceived in relation to the structure (or morphology) of the human body. This means that the general understanding of sex is di-morphic - or in other words based on 2 possibilities: male and female.

Sexual dimorphism means that males differ from females biologically: mass, metabolism, respiratory capacity or response to viral/bacteria intrusion are just a few examples of things that differentiate men from women. Secondary sexual characteristics are also part of this discussion: shape of face, bone structure, breasts, distribution of body hair, size of waist and hips, voice. There is also a genetic side to sexual dimorphism: out of the 20,000 genes recorded (so far) in Uniprot, about 6,000 are what we might call 'sexual genes' – genes strictly typical of either the male *or* the female morphology.¹⁶ 'Sexual dimorphism' is sometimes used interchangeably with '**sex difference**' - which is not appropriate. Dimorphism is mostly described by biological differentiations, while sex difference is a concept that encompasses elements like behavior, way of thinking and even feeling. Sex difference is still a matter of heated debate. Needless to say, the debate has not yet reached Romanian gender education, since there is no gender education to speak of.

¹⁵ Lavenda, Robert H. Anthropology: What Does It Mean to Be Human? New York, Oxford University Press, 2015, p.375.

¹⁶ <http://www.uniprot.org/>

Gender is often used interchangeably with 'sex'. However, as gender diversity is gaining recognition in some parts of the world, public policies and institutions are beginning to integrate this increased social awareness that gender is rather the expectations and beliefs associated with people with certain physical characteristics. These beliefs and expectations are often short-handed as 'norms,' built around a binary (male-female) axis: the idea that we 'naturally' identify as either male or female. As we will see in the last section of this article, however, these norms are socially/culturally engineered across different centuries and geographies by interests governed by political leaders.¹⁷ We would like to add here our personal observation that, when looking at leadership across centuries and/or geographies, we may find it quite striking how frequently religious leaders are also political ones, and the other way around.

Gender roles and expression norms/beliefs are also of great importance, as the expectations of society and oneself to perform certain functions in certain ways is very important in self-realization and healthy social interactions. In weighing the potentiality of social change, we must consider both internal and external awareness of how these expected roles have come to be. To avoid any ambiguity: personal identification of one's own gender is nothing to be debated; internal awareness of gender roles or gender expression can, however, be the direct reflection of societal norms and our allegiance to them, born out of a desire to belong, to be safe, or both.

Shaping and re-shaping societal beliefs about gender – identities, roles, the lot

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the conversation on transgender rights and legal gender recognition has gained momentum and even a few important victories – but not in Romania. Romanian society is miles behind mentalities, policy trends or academic discourse regarding gender diversity in Malta, Germany or Sweden, for example. Here, the conversation is still dominated by straight cisgender 'normal' men – and priests. Power is fiercely defended by preservers of 'family values' or 'our 2000-year old orthodox traditions' – who often preach sexism or domestic 'corrective' violence as 'god-ordained'

¹⁷ Idem.

normalcy. This naturally has a heavy impact on gender-related belief construction, maintenance and enforcement.

Our contention is that gender recognition in Romania, socially and legally, is dependent on Romanian-specific societal beliefs, which are in turn dependant on the personal beliefs of legislators, judges, the general public, transgender and gender-diverse persons. This article is part of a larger project, intended to coagulate and back up the transgender community in their efforts towards rightful legal gender recognition and social acceptance of gender diversity. For right now, we are looking at what shapes people's gender-related beliefs, in our culture, and how/when people become aware of their beliefs as their 'own.' For the purposes of this article, we have used these questions to guide our discussions with people of diverse gender identities:

- *When did you first become consciously aware of what it means to be boy or girl?*
- *How do you think you came to have these notions?*
- *What about other people's beliefs about what it means to be boy or girl?*
- *How did you become aware of them, and what impact did that have on you/your beliefs?*
- *What would be most effective in re-shaping/influencing Romanians' beliefs about gender – especially those beliefs which tolerate/encourage transphobia and homophobia?*

We are leaving here a selection of responses we have received, with the observation that all our respondents are involved in educating the public about gender and sexuality, as scholars or activists or both.

'My voice has always been too shrill and thin, not masculine at all, this has always been a disappointment for me. I guess I might have taken up smoking when I was very young in hopes that my voice would get thicker. When I was in middle school, I was very tall and big, and I was always hanging out with the boys. But when I would speak, they would say I'm making fun of them (If you have that voice, why are you so big?! What kind of girl are you?!) and then I would get bullied and beaten. My mom's reaction when I told her I thought boys were cooler and that I wanted to be more with them than with girls: oh my god, you'll be the village slut!'

“Personal beliefs about gender are rooted in gender stereotypes propagated by parents who are not properly informed/educated, and therefore think of gender and sex within fixed parameters. When we are very young, we learn that there is only male and female sex – gender is utterly overlooked. Another role, besides parents, and a very negative one unfortunately, is played by the church and very religious people, who do not accept science and do not follow the latest research regarding gender identities or sexual orientation.”

“Transphobia and homophobia will be combated if we patiently and calmly try to influence people’s mentalities, by offering information on gender and sexuality and being more visible in the public space. Unfortunately in Romania gender identity and sexual orientation are confused by most, and both of them are understood as sexual practices. If we continue to give people correct information about these things, eventually the public image of the (trans) community will be de-sexualized. I am very against negative visibility, due to the fact that 80% of the people I interact with socially associate the lgbtqia+ community with ‘clownery, circus, lack of education, sexualization...’ I am a great supporter of positive visibility in the public space, and educating society gradually and correctly.’

‘Boy, girl, non-binary – in the end what it comes down to is what your heart tells you. These are innate positive identities, which can only be felt – like sexual orientation. These things cannot be seen. Fortunately they are natural and diverse, and most importantly they are only reflected by your feelings. Gender identity is like this too. I am repeating myself but these are positive and innate characteristics – like the colour of your eyes, hair, skin etc.’

*‘to understand how gender, sex**, and sometimes gender identity are perceived and learned in Romanian culture we must look throughout the entire and diverse spectrum of cultures, created in every social category. Intersectionality is the mother of us all. I want that Romanians stop hating transgender and transvestite and gender diverse people and understand how we can fix this. One must look at what unites us all, and that is: fear of the unknown. Look around. People that know stuff about gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexuality, sociology, psychology etc are not afraid of gender and sex diverse people.’*

‘I was aware of the difference between sex and gender thanks to other people. I wasn’t really aware of much at that point, and was just starting to learn about how diverse

everything in the world actually is. I met someone who didn't identify as a man or a woman, and that definitely opened my eyes. I then had a very close person figuring out they were agender, and, later, another close person figuring out he was a trans man. So by that time I had done some research and it was obvious there was a huge difference between gender and sex. I do think half of it is related to gender roles, and I wonder how the world would be if those didn't exist at all. But I also know it is very much an internal thing as well, not just dependent on society's expectations. I do know nonconforming cis people, men who wear make-up or masculine women, who still are men and women, but who don't agree with what society asks of them as men or women.

I myself figured out I was non-binary some time ago, quite late, to be fair, and, luckily, I already had the vocabulary. I don't suffer from dysphoria, I like my body quite a lot and don't want to make any changes in a transition sense. I don't, however, feel that my gender is my body, at all. Or what society thinks it should be, at least.

On this note, I also want to talk about gender presentation vs gender identity. Presentation is what you appear as: haircut, clothes, make-up etc. Now, a lot of people modify those according to their gender, but that is not true for everyone. I hear a lot of arguments saying "oh, you're not gender-fluid or anything, a lot of people dress in different clothes, that doesn't mean anything". That is true, a lot of women dress in masculine clothes and don't wear make-up, a lot of men dress in feminine clothes and wear make-up, and that doesn't at all make them less of a woman or a man. For some, however, the clothes they wear are a way to express their actual gender.

Trans women might dress very feminine to show that, yes, they are women. Trans men might do the same with masculine clothes. Non-binary people might choose any combination of external elements to show their gender. It's not just a fashion statement, it is something that helps reconcile the outside with the inside. However, that does not mean that everyone does that. Clothes are just clothes, and they're only gendered because society makes them so. They help a lot of people, but some don't adhere to standard dress codes. If you see someone dressed in masculine clothes, it doesn't mean that they're a man, for example. They could be a non-binary person who likes masculine clothes, or who can't out themselves by wearing anything else, they could be a woman who likes dressing masculine, or a woman who is not yet out as a trans woman. Clothes, make-up, hair, they can be an indicative of someone's identity, but that doesn't mean they always are.

I am non-binary, and I can pull off an androgynous look really well. However, I like makeup and skirts and stuff, so I am almost always seen as my assigned sex, a woman. I like looking cute, but I don't feel like a woman, no matter how femme I look,

my internal sense is still set on what I can vaguely describe as neutral. I also don't feel like a man when wearing masculine clothes.'

'I never thought much about gender norms or expression, because they didn't mean so much to me. But when I was little, I had to confront them quite a bit because of my parents: my haircut, my outfits, my toys, my behavior – they had a say in all of these. I became aware of other people's notions of boy or girl long before I had my own, and I took them at face value: boys are like this, girls like that. This gave me a strong sense of inadequacy, which haunted me up to the moment I started my transition.'

'Romania is dominated by preconceived ideas about gender, which affects not only trans persons, but also cisgender ones, and with heavy consequences – like domestic violence. A loosening in the strictness of the expectations related to gender identity and expression should not be just the fight of queer people and their allies for recognition and acceptance. It shouldn't be ignored by the many, in the idea that 'I have nothing against them, let them do what they want.' Changing the general opinion about gender norms begins with awakening people to the idea that contesting gender roles is not something exclusive to queer people or feminists, and that it is something that needs to happen to the benefit of the entire society.'

What shapes and moves the Romanian gender helix?

In this section we are going to discuss a few of the most impactful determinants of Romanian people's understanding and acceptance of gender diversity. The space offered by this article does not allow for an extensive discussion. Below we offer our empirical observations, combined with feedback from members of the transgender community in the last 4-5 years, on some of the things that determine how Romanians process and retain information on non-cisgender persons.

Media sensationalism

There is little of note in the Romanian mass-media regarding trans persons – in the sense that the coverage is quite uniformly presenting self-objectified and self-oversexualized trans women like Naomi or Rodica Moroșanca¹⁸. In the host's and therefore public eye, these persons are men, dressed as women – therefore what they are retained as is gay men – especially as they sometimes make sexual allusions to male hosts or other guests¹⁹. Perhaps one of the most negative effects this kind of coverage has is precisely

¹⁸ For an example of a self-sexualized trans person who enforces the general confusion gender versus sex, and also rubs many transgender persons the wrong way: <http://www.stiridecluj.ro/divertiment/bataie-la-emisiunea-access-direct-video>, accessed 13 Apr., 12:00. It's a video in Romanian, but it's not consequential if you don't speak Ro.

¹⁹ <http://evz.ro/romanii-au-talent-sexy-morosanca-s-a-dat-la-smiley-in-culise-1085989.html> accessed 15 Apr 2018

on the beliefs of members of the lgbtqia+ community itself. The over-self-sexualization of these women is seen as an embarrassment by many lgbtqia+ persons who consider themselves as ‘proper’ people. We would like to note here that the over-self-sexualization is done in the belief that that’s what a ‘real’ woman is like: make up, breasts, augmented lips, high heels. If you are a trans woman, it is natural to overdo those in the first stage of your transition – sort of catching up on all the lost years when you had to dress like a man – or as a rule, if you are a performer or other professional who gets a lot of attention. In this same passage we must mention also that ‘passing’ (passing unnoticed, not as trans; fitting in) is something that is often made fun of by the media: cameras zoom in on trans women’s lips, breasts or hips for no reason, the comments to the trans woman’s answers are sarcastic etc. This entertains the public – and sells. So why change it?

Even less biased coverage, like this²⁰, repeats the mistake of insisting on sexuality as a clarifier of ‘what’ exactly this ‘transsexual’ person is: gay or straight?! The interviewee is talking about judges and gender politics in the family and ambassadors and such – but the interviewer goes back to ‘so how do you have sex’ type of questions a few times.

However, while presenting non-cisgender persons in the media sells, we would not say this happens too often. So we would end this section with the observation that the media does have a penchant for sensationalism when it comes to trans identities, but this is exercised with a pinch of caution. This is indicative of the general public’s rejection of ‘too much’ on this type of subject. If it’s just sometimes, and not too long, and not too smart, then it’s fun. If it’s too serious, then you might lose your viewers/readers.

The most recent (to date) coverage of transgender life comes from ‘Stiri de Iasi’ and it is a wonderfully unbiased piece, with only a sensationalist title – a good strategy to attract readers who are into sensationalist content to read on and be a little more educated on what transgender means. The author makes no reference to sexual or romantic intimacy, which is a definite glimmer of hope²¹.

²⁰ <https://romanalibera.ro/opinii/interviuri/interviu-cu-sasha-ichim-transsexual-sunt-judecatori-care-spun-ca-suntem-niste-monstri-304217.html> accessed 15 Apr 13:10

²¹ <https://www.stirideiasi.ro/povestea-mariei-care-vrea-sa-fie-matei-doamne-fa-sa-mi-creasca-cuc> accessed 2 Apr, 14:48

The Romanian Orthodox Church

In 2009, the USA State Department's report on religious freedom said about BOR:

'Biserica Ortodoxa Romana exercita, datorita rolului sau dominant, o influenta substantiala asupra unei majoritati a populatiei si a legislatorilor, iar liderii religiosi ortodocsi sunt singurii participanti la toate evenimentele de importanta nationala. Astfel, multi lideri ortodocsi au aparut public alaturi de politicieni importanti, iar mesajele religioase contin adesea promisiuni sau obiective politice si exprima sprijinul fata de anumite pozitii politice.²²

Things have not changed, quite the contrary: we're sitting on the brink of a national referendum costing well into 11-digits, which will make it even more impossible than it already is for gay people to get married. The Orthodox Church keeps a strict watch over Romanian politicians, and many suspect the Church's leverage comes not only from politicians' thirst for image capital, but also from serious financial interests. BOR's assets and revenue are all tax-free. The overall worth of the Romanian Orthodox Church has been assessed at over 3 billion euro – which puts it in the same league as Petrom or BCR, for example.²³ In 2015 only, the net profit declared by BOR was almost 4 million euro.²⁴

The most dangerous effects of BOR's power can be found in the public system of education. More on this in the ensuing paragraphs.

Bigotry and fear in education

Although Romania is a lay country, religion is taught in all schools, K-12. It surreptitiously entered the stream in the early 90's and by the beginning of the new millennium it had become a by-default ingredient of the core curriculum at all levels. Alarm signals about infringements to freedom of conscience began to be raised by Social Science high school teacher Emil Moise in 2005 (the case against icons in public schools)²⁵ and then again in the fall of 2012, when we formed a coalition of 30+ nonprofit organizations, which met

²² Raportul international privind libertatea de religie 2009, Departamentul de Stat SUA, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/132848.pdf> accessed 10 Apr., 21:00

²³ <https://www.money.ro/averea-bisericii-ortodoxe-depaseste-3-miliarde-euro-1/> accessed 4 Apr., 14:00

²⁴ <http://www.capital.ro/sfintele-afaceri-ale-bisericii-ortodoxe-romane.html> accessed 4 Apr., 14:06

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CNCD_Decision_323/2006

with the Ministry of Education to insist that instead of it being an opt-out, confessional religion should be an opt-in class. This came through in 2014, finally thanks to the same Emil Moise, who took the case to the European Court for Human Rights: now, students are no longer by default registered for the religion class, but have to opt in - meaning their parents have to write file a request that their child be registered for this class. In reality, students who do not attend religion are either bullied by religious teachers for being an 'atheist!' or their parents sign them up for the class against their own beliefs, because schools do not offer alternative activities/spaces – and so that makes safety an issue.

What makes the presence of confessional religion, priests and such, so problematic for gender inclusive education is that it maintains codes of behavior inside a very patriarchal, sexist, homophobic and transphobic frame. Teachers continue to say things like:

'Well, you're actually not bad at all in Maths, for a girl.'

'Mihai, don't move your hands like that when you talk – what are you, gay?!'

'What kind of girl are you, look at your hair and your clothes!'

In the meantime, if a girl comes to school dressed as if she will go to a club straight after school, few if any will comment. Sometimes in the school staff room I overhear at breaktime male teachers exchange appraisals like 'Real cute, isn't she? Not sure how much of a good girl she is, but she's sure hot.' 'Ah well, not really my type.' True story.

I'm sure such situations are not unique to Romania – but what makes Romania special is that nonconforming gender expressions or identities will be commented and taxed with no fear of opprobrium from the rest of the faculty or other students. It's in our kids' best interests to be 'normal', otherwise how are they going to have a healthy good life. We must correct any 'unhealthy' tendencies from the onset, so as to not be accused later that we saw something and let it pass. These are the self-righteous type of things one hear from homophobic and transphobic educators and school staff. The most 'tolerant' attitudes are of those who say things like: I haven't got anything against these people, but I'm just interested in this kind of things. I just teach Maths, my personal views on these matters, or those of my students, are of no consequence to my teaching. Except they are: when a gay or trans student is bullied, when a kid has a drug abuse problem caused by

lack of support and appreciation as a queer kid, when a parent beats up the queer kid so bad, you should absolutely alert the child protection authorities. One example of the bigotry and fear in which teachers and school counselors live regarding their obligation/failure to correct 'unhealthy' gender-related behaviours comes from my experience delivering a workshop on 'gender and sexual diversity' to all the 250 school counselors/psychologists in Bucharest, I delivered the workshop in 5 rounds, some 50 professionals in each cohort. A handful of these mental health professionals in the school environment had ever contemplated the notions like gender or sexual diversity. About half of them manifested some disapproval towards having to be there, from tut-tutting to loud screaming and calling out the name of Jesus. It must be mentioned these 250 school counselors/psychologists were obliged to be at the workshop by their central authority, and the workshops took place mostly at the HQ of that central authorities. These workshops took place in 2015 and 2016 and none of the mental health specialists who participated ever reached out for supplementary information etc. One of the 250 contacted me once about maybe doing a session with her students, but things never came through – although I told her there is no end to my flexibility about the venue/time of the workshop. In light of what just happened at Focsani²⁶, I realize now that she may actually have got cold feet about it.

The human rights coursebook produced in 2002-2003 by the British Council with the endorsement of the Ministry of Education has a section on sexual minorities. The methodological recommendations encourage the use of interactive methods such as guest speakers, panels and miniconferences, plays, poster displays etc. If you work in education, be warned that taking these recommendations literally will eventually get you in trouble with the Ministry.²⁷ Same for recommending a movie that portrays the emergence of symbolism as a current – after 10 years of recommending the film in which Rimbaud and Verlain have some steamy sex, granted, you will eventually get in trouble with the authorities for good old homosexual propaganda.²⁸

²⁶ <http://casajournalistului.ro/coalitia-discriminare/> accessed 15 Apr 16:43

²⁷ http://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/ancheta-liceul-george-cosbuc-capitala-unparinte-reclama-promovarea-homosexualitatii-randul-elevilor-1_5115189b4b62ed5875ec3792/index.html accessed 15 Apr 16:51

²⁸ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/educatie/o-profesoara-din-turda-a-fost-sanctionata-pentru-ca-a-recomandat-elevilor-un-film-cu-scene-gay-734788> accessed 15 Apr 16:55

If I were to say something as support and encouragement to fellow teachers that feel choked by the bigotry and orthodox/religious conformism of the public system of education, I would say 2 things: 1. Focus on the kids, not on your staff room colleagues, or the administration. Pay attention and respect to all your kids. 2. Secure a permanent position early on, then there is very little they can do to curb you anymore.

Conclusion

From media sensationalism to the influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church on political discourse and mainstream mentalities imbued through the education system, the Romanian public's personal beliefs related to 'normal' womanhood or manhood are laden with patriarchal or pathological mumbo-jumbo, backed up by ignorance and/or acceptance-seeking horse-goggle mentalities inside the transgender community itself. All efforts towards gender recognition legislation or wider gender diversity acceptance in Romania must address these beliefs, and insert in the DNA of the gender helix new and very simple easy-to-chew bits, such as:

- your reproductive apparatus or how you have sex is nobody's business, as long as things happen between consenting adults.
- gender is not about how you dress, or talk, or walk
- gender is different from sex
- gender and sexual normativity is an attack on human dignity and safety

When the general public will incorporate things like these in their understanding of gender, then judges will too, and doctors will not get out of medical school without ever having even thought about such things, and teachers will no longer call Abel by a girl's name, and he will be a successful and happy kid.

How to incorporate these simple facts in the belief helix will be another article, in another journal. In our next piece we will examine gender and sexuality related beliefs and practices in the legal and medical fields, highly detrimental to the health, education, livelihood, safety and dignity of transgender persons. Until then, you may want to read

Accept's excellent report from 2014, covering juridical practice in gender recognition.²⁹ For now, suffice it to say here that as long as the Orthodox Church will be permitted the kind of political power it has now, the possibilities for social change and acceptance of diversity remain poor. Another grim factor is political corruption, which remains rampant. We leave you with the words of Michel Foucault on 'what now' after realizing that liberty is an illusory notion, supported by the raised fist of a Romanian transgender activist whom Latour (*humans cannot be entirely reduced to marionettes!*) would have loved:

*There exists an international citizenry that has its rights, and has its duties, and that is committed to rise up against every abuse of power, no matter who the author, no matter who the victims. After all, we are all ruled, and as such, we are in solidarity.*³⁰

*In a corrupt state people are desperate. The social status gap is enormous. In a corrupt state there are HARD working people that are poor. There is frustration. Unhealed frustrations lead to violence. If you allow the right to be master of your own sex and sexuality to be taken away from the masses, then you'll be part of turning those masses into puppets ready to kill and go to war and beat and torture and murder trans people, gay people, gender diverse people, Roma people, black people, sex workers, drug addicts, homeless people.*³¹

²⁹ <http://accept-romania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Recunoasterea-juridica-a-identitatii-de-gen-a-persoanelor-trans-in-Romania-page-by-page.pdf> accessed 15 Apr 15:18

³⁰ Eribon, Didier, 'Michel Foucault', Harvard University Press, 1991, Cambridge MA.

³¹ My friend prefers to not be named. I am leaving here my warm thanks for all the help with this article – and for the patience and trust to share so many things with me along the years.

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