LUGOJ, THE MUNICIPALITY OF “SEVEN WOMEN FOR A MAN” - FROM MYTH TO POST-SOCIALIST REALITY

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Abstract: It is thought that women prevail in the municipality of Lugoj, in Romania due to the local demographic context. Popular myth, asserts that there are seven women in this city for every man. How does this myth measure up to reality? Statistics show that women are in the majority and that they play an important role in the local evolution of the neoliberal market. How are gender relations influenced when a city has “seven women for a man”? How does this affect the behavior of the masculine population? How powerful are women? Economically ranging in roles from unskilled laborers to investors, managers and entrepreneurs, are women in positions of power more likely to protect other female employees? Politically, are women more visible and are they more likely to be active in the local social and administrative fields? This study aims to objectively answer these questions while taking into account the particularities of neoliberalism in contemporary Romanian society.

Key words: post-socialist period, women, myth, municipality of Lugoj.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, POSITIONALITY AND METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

Feminist geography is focused on responding to women's inequity and the various ways in which societies are gendered. These processes occur in particular spaces and places, so that it is important to contextualize by “understanding the world in which we live, particularly a world marked by difference, including but not limited to gender” (Nelson and Seager, 2005, p. 7). Considering that each community, and even the world itself, has its own historical heritage of the production of knowledge, who would be able to formulate an “unbiased” or “true” response? Feminist geography emphasizes an acknowledgement of positionality, using gender analysis as a tool for attaining greater authenticity. Voiculescu and Lelea (2003, p. 123), argue that gender “from a geographical perspective refers to
the role of women and men in the creation of social and cultural space”. In this regard, “women are not merely objects in space where they experience restrictions and obligations, they also actively produce, define and reclaim space” (Hille, 2005, p. 267). Not only are women active agents, for example in politics and in the economy; they can also be knowledge producers.

Feminist geography offers a useful theoretical foundation to reveal particular aspects of a small community, called Lugoj. Here women have had the occasion to prevail to the extent that it was nicknamed, “the town of seven women to each man”. The evolution of the gender dynamics revealed by this old myth, filtered by the layers of time to the present post-socialist reality is analysed in this article. Grounding the research presented is the geographical assumption that, “women's daily lives are shaped by the cities in which they live...” (Preston and Ustundag, 2005, p.211). With this perspective, qualitative methods are used, as well as a quantitative demographic approach, to examine women’s experiences from that of an ordinary laborer and housewife to leaders situated in key economic and political positions in Lugoj specifically, and Romanian society more generally.

Linked to an analysis of women entrepreneurs, Lelea (2005, p.151) points out that today women “are challenging the patriarchy in new ways”. In post-socialism more sectors of the economy emphasize the role of women than in the past. Nowadays, we can speak of women involved in business, politics and other fields which previously were filled only by men. For all the changes that have appeared in Romania over the last two decades, the responsibilities are shared for the economic transition, as well as, for the new Romanian political frame. Thereby, the newly formed conditions after 1990 generated important changes at the scale of the local community and at the national level, in all of Romania. Processes such as deindustrialization after the fall of communism, followed by re-industrialization of some places, and not others, were integrated into the global economy and influenced the way of life of local inhabitants. The labor market became more dynamic and new trends emerged: the appearance of unemployment for both the female and male labor force, the investments in textiles and garment manufacturing to absorb some of the available female labor force, the possibility of working abroad with the goal of improved material prospects, the opportunities for women to become local entrepreneurs, the new emphasis on the tertiary sector of the economy as an outcome of the development of more services for women with increased disposable income, and the access of women to local political life are some of the inter-related topics that I will discuss in the following sections.

To reiterate the question this study sets forth: to what extent does the mentality of “seven women for a man” affect the recent access of women to social, political, economic and administrative urban life/decisions. The topic is linked to my PhD thesis which is focused on the study of urban restructuring in the
Municipality of Lugoj after 1990. As I was born and raised in Lugoj, I am a first-hand witness of this studied reality; as a man living in an environment dominated by the women who came to live and work here from different parts of Romania. In fact, my own mother was one of these women having migrated for work from the Ardeal region of Romania. My academic research uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Primary data collected by the Regional Directorate of Statistics from Timiș County, made available in the study, Monograph of Valeriu Braniște College, is paired with processed data gathered from applied questionnaires specifically for this research. Additionally, interviews were conducted with a representative sample of people for a more in-depth understanding. Finally, other data and information used are provided by relevant secondary sources which are concerned with the geographical space of Lugoj and relevant to the field of gender geography.

2. HOW WAS THE MYTH CREATED?

There are many interconnected reasons contributing to the myth of “seven women for a man” in Lugoj. The first one is generated by the economic space of the town which is specialized in light industry, such as textiles, known for having large female workforces (Voiculescu, 2002-2003; Popescu, 2004). These industries have a long history in Lugoj. The first was the Textile Enterprise, established in the beginning of the last century. This first inspired others to take advantage of the associated agglomeration economies with the fusion of other manufacturers including The Natural Silk Spinning. These served to attract a very important part of the female labor force along with another factory, called Munca. The local educational system specialized to support the cultivation of qualified textiles workers. For a long time, the school shared a mutual destiny with these factories. As an outcome, under the new social and economic conditions that formed in the post-war period, professional and technical education was reorganized, resulting, in 1948, with the emergence of The Vocational School of Apprentices, which is known today as the Valeriu Braniște Scholar Group. These schools, which grew quickly in their early years, provided for workers for the textiles factories in the town and at the national level (fig. 1).

In was finally in the 1960s and 1970s, that Lugoj came to be called the town of “seven women for a man”, due to the higher number of women than men. On Sunday afternoons from the downtown to the railway station, there would be a “long and continuous snake of women young and alone. The old time balls were

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full of women who danced with one another in the absence of men” (Toma, 2006).\(^2\)

Migration to Lugoj was especially high during the communist period. From 1965 to 1985, a significant number of women registered to study in the local schools and, also came for work. Two regions of Romania, Moldova and Oltenia, saw the largest percentage of these migrant fluxes (fig. 2). This period was one in which the industrialization process was amplified by the appearance of new productive units specialized for heavy industry which would attract and absorb the available male labor force, both from the town, as well as from the surrounding area. The town nickname persisted even after the gender ratio became more balanced in the 1980 after the introduction of I. U. R. T., a heavy industry factory, which attracted a male labor force (Toma, 2006).

Fig. 1: The share of girls in the total number of high school students from Lugoj between 1949 and 1973 (Source of data: Valeriu Braniște Scholar Group Monograph)

The population of Lugoj continuously increased under such conditions, eventually generating a relative balance between the male and female population. The demographic growth was also reinforced by the high birth rate that was an outcome of two specific trends. First, it was sustained by the pro-natalist politics of the totalitarian regime and, second, by the increasing rate of marriage in the town. It is important, as well interesting, to note that many marriages were between

\(^2\) In local newspaper Actualitatea, Online Edition.
partners from Lugoj and from other parts of the country such as Oltenia, Moldova, and Ardeal.

![Map of origin of women who came to study and work in Lugoj](source)

**Fig. 2:** The area of origin of women who came to study and work in Lugoj

The way of life in the local community was typically communist where women did not have significant recognition; regarded as merely an ordinary worker and a housekeeper. This patriarchal social background continued after 1990. In this context, Miroiu, (2004, p. 27, 39 cited by Bâluță 2007, p.13-82), considers that “the growth of the children, the domestic work and the double day of work, sexual exploitation and abuse, the domestic violence, the gender discrimination in professions and politics are reasons which aggravate women’s way and access to autonomy, the possibilities of women and men to be equal partners and competitors as well as the possibility of the first category to develop outside of the imposed limits by the patriarchy”. Despite all the freedoms gained with the revolution from December 1989, women are still generally dominated by the patriarchal model inherited from the past. The new economic changes brought

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3 Authors: Groza, Muntele, Țurcănașu, Rusu, Boamfă, 2008.
more autonomy as well as new challenges. In this regard, Momsen (2004, p.199), considers that the “restructuring of global economy associated with the new division of labor has marked effects at global, national and local levels”. Momsen also states that “the influence of the international economy, as articulated by transnational manufacturing companies, has created a new market for female labour” (2004, p.198). Such particularities characterized the municipality of Lugoj after 1990, simultaneously with the economic transition to the market economy in Romania.

3. SOME DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TOWN INCLUDING GENDER PERSPECTIVES

Women were predominant in Lugoj during the last century and they continue to represent the majority today, as illustrated by the evolution of the population’s gender structure from 1910 to 2008 (fig. 3). As is typical in Eastern Europe, there were more women than men in both the active population and in the group of retirees. Specifically, the female population was larger than the male population in the following cohorts: ages 15-19, 35-55, and over 60. Additionally, “the gendering of work is... evident in occupational segmentation” (England, Lawson, 2005, p. 81). Both industry and service sectors employ more women than men such as in commercial activities, financial and insurance fields, the medical system, the educational field, public administration etc. Banking services in particular attracted a predominantly female labor force. The feminization of the financial sector is detailed by Boyer (2005, p.228-241).

![Fig. 3: Population sex ratio in Lugoj, 2008](Source of data: General Department of Statistics Timiș, Romania, 2008)

4 The relevance of gender approaches on the demographical background of a space in connection with the geographical studies is express by Momsen, 2004.
The local labor market diversified after 1990 in Romania, as well as in Lugoj, with the appearance of new types of occupations. Despite this, the gains have not been distributed evenly as described by Momsen, "the new economy has provided new types of employment and networking opportunities for some people, but the uneducated, especially, older women are often marginalized" (2004, p. 242). For example, after 1990, older women in Lugoj described difficulty finding a new job following their dismissal from communist industrial jobs. Their years of experience were not considered relevant in the new economy. This is still a problem as employers prefer a young workforce. Such practices reveal discriminatory trends at the local level.

Considering the workplace discrimination and the responsibilities at home, women have a double burden as they are expected to share their labour resources between their paid work and their unpaid work which includes household maintenance, children etc. In Romania women still had the responsibility of the house and the children (Gal and Kligman, 2003). During communism, Olteanu (2003) states that, for the Romanian socialist women the devotion towards the nation consisted in their contribution to the process of the increasing births. Even with falling fertility among women, the weight of the double burden is perpetuated with the added stress of precarity and discrimination in the new economy.

4. THE WOMEN FROM LUGOJ AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIO-ECONOMIC, POLITIC AND CULTURAL TRENDS

Women and business - women as local entrepreneurs; profile of the contemporary business woman

In many places and countries, entrepreneurship “is coded as ‘male’ as an activity that is appropriate for men but not unquestionably so appropriate for women” (Hanson and Blake, 2005, p. 179). This generalization applies to Romania although after 1990 women also started to create their own businesses. Their initiative in the local economic environment was encouraged by the economic restructuring process. In addition, Eraydin and Turkun-Erendil (2005, p. 151) state that the “restructuring and the emergence of new systems of production have focused mainly on forms of flexibility that enable producers to adapt to volatile conditions in globalized markets”. Marchand and Runyan, (2000, cited by Momsen, 2004, p. 192), consider that “restructuring as a result of globalization, tends to reinforce and exacerbate existing gender inequalities”. This must be taken into account if contemporary urban development strategies are to ensure the sustainability of the local community.

With favorable conditions in Lugoj, women started to expand their businesses in order to meet the demands of the local inhabitants. As of the late '90s, their firms started to become competitive. Generally, women business owners from Lugoj are
between the ages of 30 and 55 years (figure 4); the majority were born in Lugoj or in the surrounding area (figure 5); over 50% have a high degree of education (figure 6); a significant portion of them are married with children and have many associated responsibilities; they reserve some time for their family life; almost 50% have support and help from their husbands; most had different occupations before starting their business; almost all of them have dependents, including parents and in-laws; and 70% consider entrepreneurship to be their favorite job.

The types of firms with women owners are, generally, stores and shops of food, clothes, cosmetics and other products, hair salons, restaurants and clubs, pharmacies, notary offices, small sewing factories, small constructions firms, small private clinics specialized in family medicine, dentistry, laboratories for medical research, and specialty medical clinics (such as cardiology, pediatrics and psychology). The main motivations for the women-owned businesses are: ensuring a decent income for themselves and for their families (92%); utilizing training in the social and economic environment (61%); and passion for management (8%). Conditions for the appearance of firms owned by women in the post-socialist period have been favorable since 1998. Most women in this study started their businesses after 2000 when it was considered to be a more advantageous business environment. In Romania, after 2000 the economy became more stable and more attractive for local entrepreneurs. The main sources of financial capital to open the firms are from bank credit, savings and inheritances. Most of the women business owners consider that their quality of life increased between 75% and 100% and they consider that the business volume is either 'good' and 'very good'. In the last 5 years, only a few women were forced to close their businesses; these being small sewing workshops that functioned in lohn system.5

5 According to questionnaires applied in 2009; data collected by field cross-examination; the lohn system "is a means of increasing the technological delay which separates the commissioner (the one that provides the materials and raw material; the production documentation – models, projects,
Qualitative considerations based on the analysis of applied questionnaires and field survey

In the context of the contemporary conditions of the Romanian market economy, most of the women business owners surveyed considered their business to be a success in the local economy. The sacrifice they make for this success is marked by their lack of leisure. Almost 80% of the respondents reported spending between 8 and 10 hours a day at work and, 7%, reported working 10 or more hours. Outside of work, the majority spent either 2-4 hours or 4-6 hours with their family and their children per day. Most of these business women considered their position in the economic environment as one with real future prospects and unconstrained by external factors. They reported that the real difficulties they encountered were generated by the legislative system which insufficiently protects and supports entrepreneurs and the business sector more generally. From the perspective of attitudes and behavior, the survey respondents described their own expectations of themselves. The idealized women managers and business owners were described as authoritarian, good decision makers, generous with the financial bonuses for their employees, ethical and fair, as well as rigorous in their discipline and standards. Generally, most of the women business owners promoted the female labor force in their firms, with the exception of those who are in male-dominated fields (such as construction).

designs, etc.- according to which the manufacturing of the finished product is carried out and sets the technical parameters and quality indicators for the finished product) and the manufacturer (who commits himself to manufacture the finished product according to the technical norms set by the beneficiary by the dates stipulated in the loan contract). The system in which a large part of the textile and shoe industry in Romania operates, also known as loan system/ OPT (Outward Processing Trade) implies the subcontracting of some orders for producers and distributors from the developed countries” (Bugnar and Meșter, 2008, p. 59)
The women entrepreneurs support and protect their employees and the employees tended to be devoted to their boss. Of the women managers included in this study, 78% worked with an entirely female staff (such as in retail stores, pharmacies, notary offices, medical clinics, or cosmetics). This is due to the particularities of the work involved and that women don’t tend to discriminate against women; rather they actively promoted women. Women business owners tend to consider women employees to be hard working, resourceful, devoted, ethical, serious, disciplined, punctual, capable and responsible. These strengths were thought to distinguished women from men in the labormarket. At the same time, these characteristics, together with the overall feminization of many firms and industries, served to strengthen the female labor force in Lugoj.

**Women and politics - women on the local political scene**

Politically, women are not proportionately represented in the municipality of Lugoj. Statistically speaking, 25% of the local political scene represents the involvement of women. Compounding this, the age of women in political parties indicates the predominance of the generation from 1940-1960, which means women aged 69-49. The younger persons are strongly under-represented. It is another example of how paternalism works at the political and representational level (Jucu, 2010). The main professions of the women politicians are professors, teachers, doctors, clerks, economists etc., generally occupations with more flexible schedules. In this way, they shared the time between their job, political meetings and family and household commitments. However, the political field of the local community is dominated by men. This is a common practice due to the patriarchal background of Romanian society, in general not just of Lugoj.

**5. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

From an economic decision-making point of view, we can observe that the position of women as an entrepreneurs or managers is one with real prospects for the future. However, contemporary difficulties for them are generated by the actual legislative system, by the economic particularities and by the unstable nature of the financial world. However, generally, women business owners promote the female

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6 For details regarding this section see also Jucu, 2010.
7 The values are an outcome of processed data accorded to Boldureanu, T. et al (2002, 2003), to the sheet of the town of the City Hall and to the collected data during the field interviews, 2009.
8 The access of women on the political sector as well as the dominance of it by the men represent a central research theme for many authors; for instance see Bucur, Miroiu (2002), Miroiu (2004), Momsen (2004), Voiculescu (2002-2003), Băluţă, ed., (2006), Băluţă, Dragolea (2007) etc.
labor force in their firms. Nowadays the society in Lugoj is one that is politically dominated by men. In the contemporary period, the women have had a slower start to taking on important roles in the institutional management sector (including educational, financial and social institutions). Men still dominate local decision-making even though women have come to occupy key economic positions.

Although Lugoj is considered to be the town of “seven women to a man”, from a gender perspective it’s social, economic, political and cultural dynamics are still similar to that of the national context of Romania in its efforts to adapt to the market economy. There is change because although youth know well that Lugoj is named the town of “seven women to a man”, it is considered to reflect the mentality of the generations of ‘60s, ’70s and ’80s. This myth belongs to the past generations, being deeply imprinted in its mentality, due to the intensified development of the local textile industry. This fact can be easily observed from the present analysis. At a glance, it is obvious that in the town of “seven women for a man”, women do not represent the major local actors in the political, social and economic environment. Generally, this urban space is still male dominated. After the year 2000, women have become successful, replacing the traditional weavers, spinners and tailors with the present promising managers, high functionaries, investors, entrepreneurs, politicians etc. Women as local economic actors protect the employed women, but women in politics follow the same pattern of promises without results. In spite of the demographic reality, the town still remains, even if in a metaphoric way, in the perception of the local people, as the town of seven women for a man. Although young people consider this myth to be outdated, there are still many places where a man is surrounded by four, five, six, seven or more women, usually, but not always with jobs of lower and medium status. The trend with the feminization of low-paid factory jobs is also a facet of neoliberal globalization and it has converged with the opportunity in Lugoj to justify the perpetuation of this myth into the contemporary post-socialist period.

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