A TOP-DOWN IMAGE OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

In this paper I want to point out aspects that shape women's political participation, while aiming to identify those elements which may generate their successful implication in politics**.** My research is based on the data collection offered by the volume printed in Romania, *Forţa politică a femeilor* (The political strength of women), which is a collection of interviews released in 2011 that follows three main directions: 1. the testimonies of the successful Romanian women politicians; 2. the testimonies of women who were successful or still are in various domains, but who haven't made the step to politics; 3. the opinion of party leaders, of NGO representatives, journalists (men). The current paper focuses on the first of the three above mentioned directions, namely on the interviews with the successful women of Romanian politics.

The analysis that I propose starts by identifying discursive patterns in the interviews that will later on be used to present three models (*the professional, the traditionalist model, the principled-rationalist*) that I use to, on one hand, draw the path to a successful political career, and to, on the other, understand the way in which the respondents chose to relate to their own persona through the lens of political experiences, but also in terms of how they want to present these experiences to the public. The three models will be treated also in terms of strategies developed in order to achieve success in a man's world. My wish is to highlight the way in which the patriarchal constraints shape the discourse of these women.

The conclusion is that the patriarchal constrains generates paradoxes in the way successful women politicians signifies the reality of gender inequalities, and this profoundly affects their capacity of promoting gender interests on the formal agenda of the government.

Keywords: political participation, women, Romania, the competence myth

1. Introduction

In the beginning of my paper I will present the questions asked in the above mentioned research (volume) to successful Romanian women politicians, the answers to which I will analyze later on in my paper. Who am I? When and how did I meet with politics for the first time? What has my political career been like? What was the most difficult moment in my political life? Are there any

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differences between women and men politicians? What are my role models? Who are my political role models? Is the voice of women heard in politics and what could one do to make it stronger and more coherent? Starting from the date base collected on the basis of this questions I identified three models that concentrate the way women in Romanian politics present themselves, models that will be first presented. Further more, the same models will be interpreted in terms of strategies developed in order to achieve success in a man's world, strategies that prove to be misleading in terms of a substantial representation of gendered interest, as I will argue at the end of this paper.

As for the approach, my arguments are developed on a constructivist framework paradigm that may be summarized by the tradition of interpretive epistemology and by a dynamic view over the social universe that solves the agent-structure dilemma by treating the latter as interdependent [1, 2]. Complementary to the aforementioned theoretical framework, I also used a feminist approach in data analysis. I regard feminism as having a liberating potential and, resulting from the deconstruction of gender differences and which are seen as creating illegitimate hierarchies in a democratic society.

2. Results and interpretation

So, just who are these successful women from Romanian politics? Before proceeding to the analysis, I want to stress out the fact that the interviews were self-administered, a choice that encouraged a more relaxed and unconstrained responses and that allowed the interviewed women to be more creative. Still, three self-explanatory models stand out from the interviews: the professional model, the traditionalist model and the principled-rationalist model. I want to point out that these three models should be understood weberian ideal types, while keeping in mind that they are used to help us understand the manifestation of certain social phenomenon's although they cannot be found per se in the social universe that makes the object of the analysis.

The professional is a model centred on education and on the respondent professional evolution. The respondent carefully mentions each diploma, the college degrees, but also the various professional positions. The discourse is dry, rational, very close to a standard curriculum vitae presentation and most of the times the résumé is completed by a detailed presentation of the implemented political projects, of the political areas of interest and by the projects that are to be implemented ("Born in Ploieşti, on March 27, 1976; sociology graduate, followed a postgraduate program in political science and European studies" - Roberta Anastase [3]). The person's self is mentioned in middle of the action, solving problems, becoming involved, innovating, developing, making mistakes, but learning from them.

The traditionalist model was identified based on the need of the respondent to present oneself in relation to traditional gender roles. This category of answers is also the most frequent. It suggests that before being a successful politician, the respondents are women, mothers, wives and daughters

("I am married with Mihai Balas, who is an engineer and who continues to be patient with me after 23 years and guides my footsteps, confides in me and, most importantly, always waits for me with arms wide opened after the elections campaigns" - Ioana Daniela Balaş [3, p. 33]). We should point out that such answers seem to follow a standardized pattern and that they are usually found in the first lines of the interviews. Such presentations are emotional, they focus on feelings and on the morality and they are spiced with metaphors and with epithets. This model usually comes with a vast enumeration of the qualities that these women have or that a good politician should have. This approach mixes traditional gender elements with an idealist, projective and desirable approach of political implication.

The principled-rationalist model can be characterized by the absence of any referrals to oneself. The respondents cut straight to the chase, while moving the focus from the person to problems, ideas and principles ("When talking about the presence of women in politics, with few exceptions, most people invariably think about the women now having a political career..." - Sulfina Barbu [3, p. 35]). The discourse creates the feel of a rationalist approach to the issue at hand. These women operate with verdicts, 'truths', with certainties that leave no room for interpretations. The model is different than that of the professional, as the latter focuses on the person, understood as an abstract entity which is presented as 'The Professional', meaning it uses a neutral, almost theoretical language. When reading the stories of these women, one can not help but feel that they are trying to rule themselves out of the stories.

As for the rate of one ore more models in the interviews, I can not distinguish between a clearly dominant formula, although I can say that the professional model seems to be the most frequent, while the rationalist model is less frequent. So, what we have so far are sketchy profiles of these women, based on the way in which they chose to present themselves. In the following part of the paper I will focus on their motivation to become actively involved in politics and on their political careers, meaning the way in which they climbed on the hierarchal ladder of their parties.

2.1. The motivation of political implication

In this category, the answers almost invariably cover the need to become actively involved in the community, the need to do more for the people, while active political party membership is identified as the perfect instrument for these goals. From this point of view, the discourse of the successful woman politicians seems to equate to the one of the respondents (women) from a qualitative research I made in Hunedoara [4] who see political activism as the doorway to greater good, in terms that closely resembles to the republican and communitarian theories of citizenship. We are thus talking about active women, many of which have solid professional careers, who want to do more for the community. Also, this desire to become involved in the life of the community is seen as originating from a form of altruism generated by an inborn characteristic

or by the moral teachings of the family, on one hand, and as the result of a successful career, on the other, while the latter is seen as the catalyst of involvement. Besides generic statements, like 'I became a politician to help people and the community', we see references indicating a passionate attitude towards politics, generally coming from entrepreneurs or from the women that had management positions. The latter say they learned how to help others at work, thus learning about the problems of others and being confronted with such issues, this raising their interest for politics.

When talking about the above mentioned ideal types, we see more nuances and we could propose various interpretations. Besides the desire to help, the professionals became actively involved in politics based on their professional expertise, one that the party could make good use of. They would have been successful in other areas, but politics offered them the possibility to act for the benefit of their fellow citizens and that is why they chose to become involved. They continued to promote their professionalism inside the party, by developing projects related to their areas of expertise. Even more, these women are experts in a wide range of domains, not just in the womanized ones: foreign politics, administration, transports, justice etc.

As for the traditionalist model, the main arguments gravitate around the sphere of patriarchal constructions which place women in the sphere of care, empathy and sacrifice. In this case, we are talking about women who want a better life for their families, a better future for their children, but who also want the same for everyone else around them, due to their empathic way of understanding the world. These women stress out the importance of intervention in domains like education, healthcare or social assistance and they tend to talk more about vulnerable groups, about the role of women in terms of care, about specific qualities of women, such as: calm, patience, perseverance, involvement, lucidity, the instinct to nurture, being responsible.

Last, but not least, the principled-rationalist model focuses on political involvement in terms of civic duty, meaning we should not criticize what goes on in politics from the outside looking in, but we should become actively involved in politics ("Starting with 2003, I thought that I would have to become involved in politics because that seemed to be the civil and ethical thing to do: if you believe that you can do more and better than those who you criticize, become involved!" - Maria Grapini [3, p. 101]). Also, every one of us is responsible for becoming involved in the improvement of the life quality of vulnerable groups, granted he or she had the means to do so.

Besides the interpretation of these women's motivations using the framework offered by the three models, there is a powerful and contextual catalyst to their involvement that has no direct ties to gender issues. I am referring to the communist-anticommunist dichotomy. Many of the respondents mention the euphoria felt when the communist regime fell and the need for political involvement generated by the implementation of a democratic regime, one of freedom of speech, of rights and opportunities ("since FSN was crowded by the former communist activists whose reaction of hatred and discrimination

towards genuine politicians, like Corneliu Coposu and Ion Raţiu, was increasingly violent, my husband and I decided to join the PNŢ-CD" - Angelica Boroş [3, p. 58]). In this context, to which we can add other elements of implication resulting from a reaction to the state of affairs („It was very difficult until 2005, when I refused all invitations to get involved in politics, also because we were going through a period of economic transformation, a time when I invested heavily, but also because I saw a great deal of political pressures" - Maria Grapini [3, p. 101]) we can talk about a pattern of 'against' implication or of implication as 'the last resort'.

2.2. From woman to successful woman politician

In the following section I will present the results of the research in relation to the way in which the respondents described their political evolution. In this case we can identify very clear patterns that isolate two alternate paths to the top of the political hierarchy:

• The classic path of becoming a party member of the lowest rank, then climbing on the party's ladder. In this case, the women give minute details about their evolution, starting with the classic posting of posters, to receiving the party's vote of trust, but also to winning the elections. This type of discourse is a firm one that indicates a strong feeling of identity with the group of interests represented by the party. Although various dysfunctions of the parties are mentioned, they seem isolated and removed by the antibody of teamwork and by shared values and interests. It is quite important that in such cases becoming an active politician depends on voluntary mechanisms and is quite frequently supported by the influence of a charismatic leader (Traian Basescu, Corneliu Coposu, Ion Raţiu, Petre Roman and Mona Musca are mentioned repeatedly).

• Direct access to management positions – in this situation we are talking rather about a recruitment process, during which party leaders (local leaders mainly and not the heavyweights, persons with high visibility that have the inspiring role of a charismatic leader) propose the women to become a party member with special management responsibilities. The recruitment takes place from the ranks of women who already had a superior position within the social hierarchy, women backed by impressive careers.

It is quite interesting that in the first case, the women tend to climb the political ladder of the party's women organization (e.g. Oana Badea, former State Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Ionela Daniela Balaş), while in the second we are talking about management positions within the party (founding members of local organizations, in the case of new parties – e.g. Lia Ardelean, engineer and entrepreneur, running straight for a position of PM – e.g. Sanda Maria Ardealeanu, Professor Maria Barna, former union leader – "I don't have that much political experience, since this is my first mandate in Parliament and I can not say that I have a long political career behind me either. In fact, politics

hasn't been a goal in itself for me; I became the person and the professional that I am today in a context that had nothing to do with politics." [3, p. 38])

One should not understand that the women that are recruited as top ranking party members don't have positions in the women's organizations, as they do, but these positions are rather auxiliary or even 'ornamental', unlike the first situation, when the top of the ladder may be represented by the local women's organization. I say this because whenever I read this paper I had the same feeling I do when having to talk about the necessity of substantial gender-mainstreaming in various domains. In such cases, I get the feeling that any institution and organization brings gender issues into discussion or that the existence of a significant percentage of women leads to creation of parallel structures used to create 'a separate playground' for women: women's party organizations, gender conferences, women's nights, where men are denied access (especially on March 8), gender studies in international relations, economic gender studies and so on. In the case of political recruitment, women's organizations seem to be constructed based on two functional dimensions: the recognition granted to the contribution of hard working women during election campaigns, although, sadly, Romanian women's organizations continue to play a limited role in political parties, and the preparation of loyal troops (as stated by Roberta Anastase, the President of the Chamber of Representatives) that can be used according to the party's needs and that may end up in genuine decision making seats.

If we return to the three models identified in the beginning of this analysis, we could say that when describing their political careers, the professionals will always try to tie their competences to their political agendas and to their climbing of the political ladder, thus presenting themselves as the products of their own capabilities. Even more, this model is most frequently identified with direct access to the top of the hierarchy and the description of the political career is sketchy or even lacking from the interviews.

The traditionalist model has more affinities, as it should, with the classic way of climbing the political ladder and with a significant background of actions within the political organizations of women. Another aspect worthy of being mentioned is that in this case the status of these women is legitimized by the call to the theory of differences [5-7] and of gender interests [8], meaning interests resulted from the specific activities of women, whether having to do with womanly experiences or with femininity [7, p. 27]. This is how the respondents create coherence between their positions, projects and domains of activity, between their beliefs and representations concerning the role of women in politics.

The principled-rationalist model could be characterized as the model that leaves tensions behind, both those generated by gender differences and those resulted from the construction of this genuine 'myth of competence' which is exploited by the 'professionals'. The model fills this gap using a continuum between political, civic, labour (see career), but also family life. As mentioned before, when talking about this way of signifying reality we are in fact talking

about a normative position. In fact, these women operate with the desirable and they find ways to construct their universe around this idea and to bring it as close as possible to the normative which they invoke whenever it is needed.

In conclusion, successful women politicians have two alternatives to climb the ladder of political organizations: receiving a management position within the party – straight to the top –, or the classic way of climbing the hierarchy. We also see three ways of signifying the ascension by using ideal types built on self-positioning towards political participation.

2.3. Of 'the competence myth', difficulties in political life and new ways of increasing women's representation in politics

In this final part of the analysis I will present a bird's eye view of the moments identified by these women as difficult ones for their political careers and starting from this I will describe what I call 'the competence myth' and the impact of such a way of understanding the social universe in relation to finding new ways of increasing women's representation. It is likely that, when asking the question about the difficulties encountered by the women politicians during their careers, Andreea Paul Vass, the books' coordinator wanted to introduce gender, as an explanatory variable. Surprisingly, the answers to this question seem to be by far the most neutral, the least questionable from a feminist stance. In short, the most difficult moments of these women's careers gravitate around losing the elections. Even more, we are not talking about losing one's elections race, rather about the party or other colleagues losing. A simple conclusion would be that the respondent are excellent team players and that gender does not lead to that many implications in this case, since the interviews mention the general mobilization during the elections campaign.

Still, when returning to the constructivist paradigm that I use to make my analysis and to way in which individuals signify reality as agents capable of generating change, but also in the virtue of structural constraints, we could interpret the findings in a different manner. It is my belief that in a context clearly centred on gender issues (the respondents were aware of the stake of the interviews), such neutral answers only point out even more the way in which the patriarchal constructs throw these women into what is called by feminist literature 'the classic model of political involvement embodied by the white, middle-class man'. What is in fact happening is the denial of gender differences which, if used, could strengthen certain stereotypes or could be interpreted as affirmative actions, while 'successful' women do not need this kind of attention or treatment. They have made it to the top without making use of gender differences in this manner.

The 'competence myth' is born in this context - „us women should leave the old mentalities behind and we should make men appreciate us more by using the creativity and harshness that characterize all women" - Maria Cabalău [3, p. 65], meaning there are not barriers for the political implication of women, other than those projected by the women themselves. This is why competence and

professionalism become the most invoked element by the successful women politicians in the process of legitimizing their management positions – in these situations we usually see a distancing from affirmative policies aiming to increase the political representation of women. But we are also talking here about what Iris Marion Yung calls the 'merit myth', meaning the assumption that social hierarchy should be based on merit and on the measurement of each individual's competences [9]. This assumption may only be functional in the context in which individual performance is measured using culturally neutral criteria, which is not the case in patriarchal societies, where such criteria are clearly constructed to discriminate women.

This way of understanding reality is by far the least efficient, in terms of the political participation of women, since gender inequities are not challenged by the ones falling victims to their influence, by women themselves. This approach traces the path of a 'regular' political career for a woman professional, but what is worst is that the second dimension of the inference, although unmentioned, clearly states that only incompetent women do not make successful political careers. The conclusion would therefore be that women either do not want to or can not go into politics and then the lack of representation is of their own doing.

Starting from this conclusion, we can identity two clear ways of understanding the instruments that would increase women's representation:

• refuting affirmative actions, like gender quotas, a position that is in line with the professional model, with praising competence as a universal door opener, irrespective of gender identity and in line with the belief that you can do it if you want to and if you can do it, then gender is not relevant;

• supporting (to various degrees and in different formulas) affirmative policies, correlated with viewing differences as the main argument to a rigid definition of gender roles, an approach that can be encountered at the traditionalist model and at the principled-rationalist model (based on the assumption of gender equal opportunities, as a universal principle).

3. Conclusions – the paradox of the differences that matter

How does one become a successful woman politician and why do we see such a poor representation of women in decision making structures? The successful politicians give minute details about the difficulties encountered in being involved into politics, such as: the need of a career, in order to be relevant on the political scene or the 'obsession' of competence and of professionalism that are invoked in order to fill the 'gap' of being a woman in a man's world. Even though these women do not emphasize the fact that that politics is still a field dominated by men, this being the cause for their lack of representation because they themselves should be the living proof of the monopoly of men being broken. We are talking in fact about a way of understanding the lived reality of gender inequities in politics: an inside view that give birth to the need for justifications that manifest themselves in two ways: one which focuses on

neutrality and on competences (the professional model and the principled-rationalist model – the policy of ideas) and another that of the differences that matter (the traditionalist model). Two important problems arise from this find:

1. The token issue – the fact that we are talking about a relatively low number of women politicians turns them not into representatives of their category, but rather into tokens [10].

Therefore, even if we are talking about a low number of women politicians, their impact is not necessarily proportional with their numbers, on the contrary, by acting as tokens these women are even more visible, and their visibility is linked directly to gender identity. In this context, adopting the strategy of neutrality, of *masculinization* and a discourse that excludes gender differences ('I am a woman politician and I have never been discriminated') successfully shadow the difficulties faced by women politicians (the tension between their family life and their career, being promoted mainly to decorative positions of little influence, like those of the women's organizations, their focus on certain fields, like education, healthcare, social assistance, the fact that they are paid less, etc.). Also, in the context of a patriarchal society such strategy only perpetuates gender inequities and legitimizes them, since women are not the first to challenge them.

2. The exploitation of differences – although beneficial, from the perspective of the representation of gender interests, it obviously poses the risk of essentialization, since this perspective is supported by the traditionalist class of women politicians. This model exploits differences, although most of the times it does so in a stereotypical manner and from the ranks of women's management structures. We are talking here about women's organizations that handle education and care based on the fact that they are represented differently inside political parties, thus losing power because they create their own space of action. This has two implications: it creates the impression that problems are being solved and that gender interests are being represented, while preventing such problems from ever reaching the mainstream public agenda.

I believe that what goes on in these situations is a paradox that acts against women. Women, to be more exact, have the tools needed for a genuine representation of their interests, but they stay stuck between constructing a coherent image of themselves, who are successful politicians, while also being included in the 'vulnerable' category of women, as far as politics is concerned. This detaches them from the essence of political representation as women, form the common experiences of women that would lead to a better representation of gender interests [11]. In this situation, the antidote seems to be represented by the call for competence, a neutral principle that cannot be easily challenged in a modern society, while the substance of gender representation, through the call to differences, is emptied of substance or even devalued.

In the end, we are talking about women who, once they become politicians, either deny their gender identity, becoming men or neutral actors, or they fail to fight the big fight, as they continue to play on a separate playground, that although is a public one, has been designed for them by patriarchal society.

This means that these women politicians are returning to a politics of ideas, of representation that is disconnected from experiences and that could be represented by anyone [12]. Paradoxically, the women of Romanian politics seem to thus contribute to the emptying of content of the policy of presence. The effect may be very important, meaning that it may strengthen misogyny and the competition among women, in response to their incapacity of conforming with the expectations of those whose interests they should represent

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