Gender Equality Policies, Social Citizenship and Democratic Deficit in the Post-communist Romanian Society

Alina Hurubeană*

Abstract

During the last twenty years, studies on democracy have shed light on the issue of social inequalities, which are a challenge for all democratic societies and which are configured based on gender, age, socio-professional status, religion or ethnicity. These analyses not only refer to democracy as a type of government but also investigate its deeper meaning, the one related to equal opportunities, social justice and social citizenship. In the absence of functional mechanisms able to lessen social disparities and to increase the level of inclusion, the quality of life, guaranteeing social rights and equal access to opportunities/resources, contemporary societies are challenged by a major democratic deficit.

This research approach starts from the premise that political democracy (as a representative democracy) is not enough to talk about real democracy, because it needs to be supplemented by economic and social democracy. The paper advances a new correlation between social development indicators, social rights/social citizenship and the quality of democracy. Recent research in political sciences (G. Abels and J. M. Mushaben, 2012) shows that viewing the European Union through a gender lens exposes its double democratic deficit – one involving women’s underrepresentation across EU institutions and decision-making institutions, the other reflecting the lack of gender sensitivity in EU policy-making. The paper interrogates the democratic deficit in the Romanian society placed in the actual European context. The analysis of family policies, of labour market or social security policies, from the perspective of their correlated effects on the dynamics of gender relationships, offers relevant indicators with regard to the welfare regimes and quality of democracy / democratic deficit in the post-communist Romanian society.

* Postdoctoral researcher, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza”University of Iasi, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Romania

Keywords: social citizenship; democratic deficit; gender equality; gender equality policies; post-communist Romanian society.

* Corresponding author. Tel: 0744 577181; E-mail address: hurubean.alina@yahoo.fr
1. Introduction

The research aims to enhance the level of understanding and operationalization of the concept of *democratic deficit* from a new perspective, that of social inequalities, gender disparities and *intersectional exclusions*, which are present in various proportions in contemporary democratic societies. The research proposes a rethinking of the concept of democracy, bringing into the spotlight the need to make new correlations between social development indicators and the quality of democracy, and to identify the mechanisms through which gender disparities (gender gap), contribute to the creation of democratic deficit in the post-communist Romanian society.

Recent research in political sciences shows that viewing the EU through a gender lens exposes its *double democratic deficit* – one involving *women’s underrepresentation* across EU institutions and decision-making bodies, the other reflecting the *lack of gender sensitivity in EU policy-making* (Abels & Mushaben, 2012). This project is included in this area of research that seeks to answer to both deficits by searching new approaches and possible solutions. In Romania, research on this topic is needed, but it is relatively less developed. In this context, the integration of the gender perspective within the theoretical analysis on democracy is imperatively necessary for understanding that gender inequality is a major barrier in the human development and the democratization of society, with significant social costs.

2. Theoretical background: democratic deficit - a multidimensional concept

During the last twenty years, studies on democracy have shed light on the issue of social inequalities, which are a challenge for all democratic societies and which are configured based on gender, age, socio-professional status, region, or ethnicity. These analyses not only refer to democracy as a type of government but also investigate its deeper meaning, the one which is related to *equal opportunities* and *social justice*. In the absence of functional mechanisms able to lessen social disparities, to increase the level of inclusion and the quality of life, guaranteeing social rights and equal access to opportunities/resources, contemporary societies are challenged by a *major democratic deficit*.

Launched during the 80s, on the background of the movements for a united Europe, the primary meaning of the concept of *democratic deficit* has developed in relation with the democratic legitimacy of EU institutions and of their decision-making mechanisms. Progressively, specialist analyses of democracy have identified new facts/dimensions of democratic deficit, with reference to the operation of representative institutions and of participative democratic practices in society. The concept has been less studied in its theoretical and methodological complexity and multidimensionality. Seen from this perspective, democratic deficit develops when there emerge major discrepancies between the theoretical models of democracy (Sartori, 1973; Lijphart, 2006) and the political and administrative practices of a society. If we take into consideration the model of parliamentary, polyarchal democracy, we can identify a *democratic deficit* when:

- governmental decisions are not mediated by the practices of parliamentary democracy;
- the principles of representativeness and pluralism become ineffective;
- the people’s level of participation in politics is low;
- there are social disparities which affect the principle of the citizens’ political equality or the levels of democratic inclusion of those who live in society at a given moment;
- there emerge radical, antidemocratic political and social movements.

At the same time, *democratic deficit* may also be understood as an interaction between the citizens’ increasing expectations, the negative news on social, political, and economic reality and week governmental performance.
In other words, democratic deficit may be signalled, according to specialist analyses, in relation to three major spheres of contemporary democratic societies (Caillé and Lafortune, 2007):

- Elective and representative mechanisms;
- Consultative and participative mechanisms;
- Social inclusion mechanisms / social citizenship.

This paper focuses on the last dimension of democratic deficit, seen as social exclusion and paucity or what is usually called social citizenship (the right to social security) from a gender-based perspective and intersectionality approaches. Considered from this viewpoint, the analysis of democracy refers to the State’s role in guaranteeing equal opportunities and social justice through public policies and social security programs.

3. Democratic deficit and social citizenship in the perspective of gender analysis

The theory and practice of classic liberal democracy, far from being gender neutral, blocked and limited for a long time women's access to full citizenship, with reference to the multitude of the dimensions of this condition, an aspect which has had a direct impact on the formulation of public policies in relation to the generic category of the "universal citizen" which, in fact, refers to man as the head of the family and an independent paid worker. Against this "universal benchmark", women, as "second-rank citizens", were given only derived and fragile rights, which have kept them in a condition of economic and symbolic dependence to their husbands/partners. Feminist research and gender studies question the supposedly universal concept of citizenship and the issue of women's exclusion, for a long time, from the scope of civil, political, and social rights (Walby, 2000). The victories won by women in the area of political and civil rights in the 20th century also contributed to the improvement of the status of their social citizenship, in relation to which there are still many things to change, which, to a great extent, are related to the re-conceptualization of the complex relationship between various types of equality and freedom in the both spheres of social life, the area of public and private life, productive and reproductive work, themes launched by the feminist theory as early as the 1960s but which are still not exhausted (Del Re and Heinen, 1996).

The gender approach developed at least three recent methodological aspects:

- as compared to traditional political theories of democracy, which focus mainly on the institutional and procedural mechanisms of political democracy, this research advances a new correlation between social development indicators, social rights/social citizenship and the quality of democracy (International and European documents and databases, 2006-2012). The research starts from the premise that political democracy (representative democracy) is not enough if one needs to establish a real democracy, because it needs to be supplemented by economic and social democracy;
- in relation to the comparative analyses of the welfare-state’s public policies, which do not account for gender relationships or for the specific effects of public policies on women and men, this approach integrates the gender-based perspective into the analysis of the welfare-regime’s public policies and focuses on those policies which have a significant impact on the gender-based social relationships, in terms of maintaining or diminishing gender-structured social inequalities (Sainsbury, 1996; 2000; Letablier, 2001). The analysis of family policies, of education and training policies, of labour market, career development or social security policies, from the perspective of their correlated effects on the dynamics of gender relationships, offers relevant indicators with regard to the quality of democracy and democratic deficit (Silvera, 2010);
- research focused on reconsidering and revising the border between the public and the private sphere shows that running public life according to the principles of democracy cannot be achieved without enforcing those principles in the private sphere in the first place, and approaching the issue of the political participation of
women and promoting women’s employment without paying heed to the constraints of private life is pointless and it also implies a very narrow and restrictive outlook with regards to democracy (Phillips, 2000). Women’s low participation in the political life, as well as the frequent interruptions of their careers can be largely explained by the private constraints which exert a pressure upon their public engagement (e.g. the time budget of women and especially those who are mothers is different from men’s, the subordinated roles in the domestic sphere which generate and maintain the women’s lack of self-confidence, as well as the low-esteem representations of women) (Băluță et all, 2007). Behind the issues of correlating productive labour with care, professional life with family/personal life lies, more or less overtly, the stake of equality between women and men in the public and private space (Bereni et all, 2011).

Among the various liberal trends which founded modern and current democracies there are major differences in what regards the correlation freedom-equality, civil and political rights versus social rights. If classic liberal doctrine and practice sees gender equality as equality in civil and political rights, things become more complicated when equality in social rights is brought to the fore, an aspect which reveals the structural gender inequalities present in the sphere of public and private life and the inequalities relative to paid work and domestic work, respectively. From the perspective of social liberalism, gender equality, understood as freedom to access social rights is far from becoming a tangible reality in all European countries. Thus, the meanings of equality in relation to the idea of liberty are currently reconsidered from the perspective of the feminist research that has analysed the welfare states in the European area (Miroiu, 2004).

For social welfare liberalism, unlike classical and neo-classical liberalism, equality is the premise needed to achieve individual freedom and independence. In this respect, equal opportunities mean not only removing the obstacles that oppose the exercise of individual liberties but also meeting the basic needs of people (men/women), and the state assumes a role in ensuring the citizens' welfare (Miroiu, 2004). This is quite difficult to understand and implement in the post-communist society, which has to deal with many gender inequalities, deeply rooted in social structures. All the more difficult as it has passed from an extreme to the other in what regards the state's role, from the all-mightiness of the intrusive state to the minimal state of the classical liberal type. Therefore, if, in today's Romania we reduce the idea of gender equality to equal chances understood only based on the meritocratic principle, we actually support fake gender equality or at the most, a formal not an actual type of equality. If we act only with legal tools and anti-discrimination measures, without approaching the grounds of gender inequality in the sphere of public and private life, ignoring the fact that social welfare (social citizenship) is not equally accessible to women and men, it means we are dwelling at the level of an ideological discourse with visible demagogic nuances (Dragomir and Miroiu, 2002). In the countries of the European Union, gender equality is more visible and tangible where the social-democratic agenda ensures the functioning of social welfare regimes.

4. Conclusion

The current research on public policies considers that the analysis of family policies, of labour market and social security policies, from the perspective of gender (in)equality, offers relevant indicators with regard to the welfare regimes and quality of democracy or to the democratic deficit in the post-communist Romanian society, placed in the actual European context. The orientation of gender policies in the post-communist Romanian society towards the attenuation of gender differences and disparities (by anti-discrimination measures) is believed to be superficial, because it only deals with the effects and not with the causes of gender inequalities and democratic deficit. This type of approach does not produce lasting changes at the level of gender relations, often resulting in at least two "twisted effects": a) "equality in a field led to the deepening of inequalities in other fields.
The classic example is the equal right to paid work, which led to women's overworking in general, because it just added to the work that they already did in their households" (Pasti, 2003); b) women's right to vote "did not significantly change the face of politics in almost any of the states in which this process took place. Women were forced to simply integrate into the policies defined by men" (Pasti, 2003). In their turn, gender blind policies (the non-gender biased approach) are no longer considered to be a solution to the issue of gender asymmetry and inequalities. Changing the orientation of public policies towards the deep mechanisms of the structuring of gender relations as relationships of power (in the context of public and private life), correlating the policies that enforce the public sphere (and especially policies related to the labour market) with the policies focused on the security zone or social rights and which regulate private life issues (family, maternity, sexuality, domestic labour, care labour, reconciling professional life with personal and family life), could be a realistic alternative in order to balance gender relations in our society and to build a substantial or real democracy.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/89/1.5/S/62259, Project „Applied social, human and political sciences. Postdoctoral training and postdoctoral fellowships in social, human and political sciences” cofinanced by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013”; the project is developed at the University "AL.I. Cuza" Iasi, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences.

References:

**International and European documents and databases:** Specific indexes, Eurostat, HDR – Human Development Reports:

- *Gender Inequality Index* in human development (GII): longevity, education, standard of living;
- *Women’s Participation Index* (WPI): participation in political decision-making; participation in economic decision-making; income;
- *Global Gender Gap Index:* participation and economic opportunities, educational success, health, longevity, political representativeness.