



Women's Lives around the World: A Global Encyclopedia

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 (eds.)

4 volumes, 2018, ABC-CLIO GREENWOOD,
 USA

ISBN Print: 978-1-61069-711-8
 ISBN e-book: 978-1-61069-712-5

Book review by Roxana-Elisabeta Marinescu

Women's Lives around the World is a monumental work, presenting a diversity of women's issues with an emphasis on their present-day situation. It includes an overview of women's private lives in 150 countries and territories, their education, careers, struggles, achievements and hopes, organised in four volumes⁶. Building on previous work⁷, *Women's Lives around the World* refines the existing research and shows the transformations, accomplishments and setbacks women have encountered since, in significantly more countries and territories (150 vs. 130 in the 2003 publication).

The way materials are organised, in separate essays geographically, per country, plus sidebars with details on individual women or relevant topics, facilitates reading, as one can go back and forth following country specific or topic selections. The authors use a variety of primary source documents to present major statements, laws or policies regarding women's issues (such as UN statements or excerpts from different constitutions), as well as specific events, local or

⁶ Vol I: *Africa and The Middle East*; vol. II: *The Americas*; Vol. III: *Asia and the Pacific* and Vol. IV: *Europe*.

⁷ *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Women's Issues Worldwide* (2003) in six volumes by Lynn Walter, Manisha Desai, Cheryl Toronto Kalny, Amy Lind, Bahira Sherif-Trask, Aili Mari Tripp, Greenwood Press.

international institutions and ideas. The clear and logical organisation makes chapters very easy to access, despite the enormous amount of material included.

The perspective is an intersectional transnational feminist one, as the general editor Susan M. Shaw explains in the Preface: “Drawing from transnational, multicultural, postcolonial, and queer feminisms, these volumes seek to understand women’s lives from perspectives of privilege, power and systems of oppression.” (xi) The authors examine the exercise of power in different contemporary societies nowadays, with a local lens (authors of country chapters were recruited locally) to depict various feminine identities at the intersection with ethnicity, nationality, race, social group, class and caste, religion, sexual orientation, ability, etc.

The main selling point of this encyclopedia is that it presents a global perspective, but at the same time examines in-depth specific local issues – among those, growing wealth inequality and women’s restricted access to resources, women’s lack of or reduced political representation, unequal pay and the gender pay gap, the harsh effects of wars and increased immigration on women, inequalities regarding work-life balance (more free time for men and more unpaid work for women), increase in domestic violence and violence in general against women, vulnerability regarding reproductive rights, etc. The effects of colonialism and communism on women are traced in postcolonialism and postcommunism, respectively. Some examples: Hindu nationalism and the perceived limited rights of religious minorities in contemporary India or the pronatalist policy in Romania and its effects nowadays.

The layout is very reader friendly, each entry presents a snapshot of women’s lives in that specific country or territory; they follow some general subchapters while emphasizing some country or region-specific issues. These include an overview of women’s lives, the experience of girls and teens, access to education, employment, family life, involvement in politics, women’s role in religion and culture. Of course, from the time of writing and publication, details may have changed in some countries and it has not always been possible to update or re-write some of the entries. Therefore, a very good idea is the Further Resources section after each entry, offering more material and engaging the readers in a very up-to-date fashion to do research on their own in topics of specific personal interest.

The entry on Romania (pp. 270-280, author Roxana-Elisabeta Marinescu) follows the general framework of *Women’s Lives around the World* encyclopedia. Thus, it includes the country overview, with a focus on its communist and postcommunist periods with their past and present

gender accomplishments and inequalities. The subchapters are Girls and Teens (subtopics are child abuse and child trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation; children left behind as a consequence of their parents' emigration, and teenage mothers); Education (primary and secondary, university and special needs); Health; Employment; Family Life; Politics (including LGBT rights, sexuality and reproduction, communist pronatalist policies and their aftermath); Religious and Cultural Roles. The issues specific to Romania are, besides the pronatalist policy section, the risk of poverty and social exclusion for women and violence against women.

The portrait of Romania coming out of this entry is of a European country, a member of the EU, with some achievements regarding gender (such as the Law of Equal Opportunities between Men and Women – 2002 or the one decriminalising homosexuality – 2001, although they were both adopted under EU pressure in the pre-accession period), and also with many problems awaiting their solution. For example, Romania ranks first or second in the EU (depending on the year of the statistics) concerning teenage mothers and among the first regarding the number of abortions, both a consequence of past communist policies, and also of present lack of political will to address them in a coherent and definitive manner.

As in the case of other country entries, some of the examples or illustrations present only a snapshot at the time of writing, and not their resolve (which is still pending even at the time of writing this book review). Examples include the statement of the former Minister of Labor (July 2016) regarding child trafficking and child prostitution in several state institutions in the country or the request of a same-sex American-Romanian couple to have their marriage and rights deriving from that recognized on the territory of Romania.

All in all, *Women's Lives around the World: A Global Encyclopedia* is a very important research instrument and a relevant tool for all institutions, organisations and individuals interested in the general present situation of women around the world and in very specific and topical aspects in regional contexts. Also, as the editors express their hope in the Introduction, these volumes should “inspire critical thinking, conversation, and a desire to know more about the lives of women around the world”, while also they should “evoke a commitment to work to improve the lives of women and all marginalized people.” (xix)

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New Series. Issue No. 9 (23)/ 2017