Citizenship in the Feminine

Essay

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Author's note:

The title refers both to the grammatical gender of the word "citizenship" in Romanian
— a feminine noun —
and to the feminist perspective from which this essay is written.

Abstract

This essay explores the concept of citizenship through a gendered lens, reflecting on how being a woman intersects with structures of power, identity, and participation in public life. Through autobiographical storytelling, the author traces her path from unawareness to political consciousness, confronting moments of privilege, exclusion, and resistance. The essay also critiques liberal feminism's assumption of a universal sisterhood by pointing out the structural inequalities among women based on race, class, sexuality, and bodily autonomy. Ultimately, Citizenship in the Feminine is both a personal-political reflection and a critique of a patriarchal social order that tolerates women's presence in civic life only under conditions of silence, gratitude, and non-disruption. It advocates for a redefinition of citizenship as a lived, negotiated, and often contested experience — especially for those whose identities are marked by gender and other intersecting vulnerabilities.

Keywords: citizenship, gender, feminism, privilege, liberalism

For a long time, I thought citizenship was something you have, not something you do. Like a bracelet you wear but never look at too closely. It was there, in the file, on my ID, somewhere in the drawers of the state. But I wouldn't have known how to say exactly what that meant, apart from the fact that I could vote, if I woke up in time on a Sunday. It was much later that I started learning and understanding that I was born with full rights guaranteed by my citizenship — but my grandmother wasn't.

Historically, women had to fight to be citizens in the truest sense of the word, having been long absent from this story. In Romania, even though women were granted the right to vote on paper in 1938, the reality was far more nuanced. In practice, that right was more like a favor reserved for a very small elite of educated and high-status women. It wasn't until 1946, with the onset of the communist regime, that women were actually called to vote — but the choices were pre-decided. So, Romanian women only really voted freely for the first time after

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the fall of communism, in 1990, when the first democratic elections were held after nearly half a century of totalitarianism.

My first encounter with the concept of citizenship happened when I left for university abroad and lost my ID during a layover. Almost symbolically, and yes, a bit of a cliché, the main character of my novel lost their only proof of identity, of citizenship, at the border between home and the unknown. By then, my luck was at the hands of Schengen area. Both the country of my layover and my final destination were part of Schengen. My family still tells this story like it was some funny adventure. My dad even posted the song *"Lost ID"* by the romanian singer Smiley on Facebook. But behind all the circus, I had my first major realizations — which I only managed to articulate much later.

In the current context of growing tensions around immigrants in Western Europe and even in Romania, I think that was the first time I questioned my white privilege. I remember that during my flight, I was among a few other Romanians, including some visibly Roma women. They were dressed in their traditional attire, carefully styled — and of course, they drew the usual reactions of curiosity from white Western Europeans who were most likely leaning fascist. No one looked at them with admiration. I honestly felt sorry for them, because I knew what kind of humiliation they were about to face just to board the flight. Once we landed at the final destination, the rest of us white Romanians passed easily through the former passport gates, where only a few border guards were posted. But those Roma women were not granted the same anonymity. Without any clear reason, they were stopped and questioned. I swallowed hard and walked away quickly. Out of the four of us, I was the one closest to being in the country illegally — yet my appearance promised a European citizen with rights.

Later, of course, I got my own share of suspicion from citizens who felt threatened by my Balkan accent. My physical appearance helped me go unnoticed, I could even pass as local, but as soon as I opened my mouth, the airport interrogation I had escaped began in a different form.

> *Where are you from? Why did you come here? Don't you have schools back there? Is Romania in the European Union? When are you going to learn our language?*

Over time, the feeling of not belonging became a kind of personal discourse, helping me connect with other Balkan wanderers lost in the Western order of that country. While I lived there for my studies, my gender was overshadowed by my national identity. Only when I returned home for good did I begin to see the gendered differences that I once saw as personal failures.

At a family barbecue, an old friend of my dad's told me to stop with the nonsense — patriarchy doesn't exist anymore. He went on to explain that we live in a modern Romania, that I have everything I could ever want, that I've done whatever I wanted, and that I should be grateful I was *allowed*. Oh, and that I should stop with this feminist crap because I'll never find a man that way. I'm still not sure what's more ridiculous: the fact that a sexist, misogynistic man who had previously given me "life lessons" was now explaining patriarchy to me like it was this imaginary thing as my Dutch colleagues thought of Transylvania, or the fact that he did so while eating grilled sausages and barking orders at his wife not to forget the mustard. For him, patriarchy is imaginary — a feminist ghost made up by frustrated women who

"couldn't land a man." Jokes aside, I would've liked to ask if lower wages for the same jobs are also made up. Or if being "allowed" to have a career is the same as equality. But there was no point. I smiled and nodded, like I've learned to do when I know a conversation is closed before it even begins. But inside, I was boiling. How deeply ingrained is this idea that we, as women, should be *grateful* for carving out space in places where we always should have been? That having equal rights isn't something natural, but a privilege that can be revoked if we "go too far with feminism." That's how you realize that despite modern appearances, the collective mindset is still deeply rooted in patriarchal logic. No one's denying that women work, vote, or attend university — but it's expected that all this won't come with too much voice, too much independence, or, heaven forbid, too much political opinion.

That man isn't an isolated case in how I experience citizenship. In traditional spaces, like Romania, women exercise their citizenship accompanied by the background noise of men's unsolicited advice and opinions. They're always there to correct you, to police your tone, to say when you're "too loud," when you're "exaggerating about your rights," when you "shouldn't get involved because it's politics." Our citizenship — as women — is often lived as a continuous exam, with uninvited proctors. To me, citizenship isn't just about rights and obligations written in a Constitution. It's about who gets interrupted in a debate. It's about who has "authority" in the eyes of others, and who always needs to show proof. In spaces dominated by traditional norms, gender isn't just an identity detail; it's an access filter. And for women — especially those from vulnerable communities, young, queer, Roma — citizenship is negotiated daily. With the state. With the community. With the job market. With the family. With men who still see themselves, one way or another, as the gatekeepers of our personal democracies.

I've loved politics since I was a child. At my dad's house, all conversations were political — they were all supporters of Băsescu. During my visits, I didn't watch cartoons; I listened to news and political talk shows. I liked the debates even if I didn't understand them. Later, I fought to have my voice heard during family discussions. In my dad's family, authority is earned in two ways: either if you have a penis, or if you go to a lot of school. It took me longer to earn my place at the table than it took my younger brothers — who are still in middle school.

After I went abroad for university, my dad started bragging about me more than before. "My daughter's in the Netherlands. She's studying arts, but at a good university — she'll come to her senses." When I graduated, I had a minor in cultural diversity, so now I was taken seriously at barbecues when we talked about imperialism, globalism, and the colonizing history of Western European countries.

When I applied to a Master's programme, no one in my family knew. The results shocked them. Suddenly, I was "the smart kid in the family," though always with a tone of surprise as if I'd been chosen by fate, not as if I had studied, worked, applied by myself. My dad, though visibly proud, still introduced my story with, "Anyway, she's not the type to be tied to the kitchen." My citizenship became a kind of family performance not necessarily in terms of recognition, more like "look, it can be done and maybe, with luck, she won't end up alone." That's when I started to realize that civic and political participation isn't just about voting or posting about a protest. It's also about how you carve out space despite the

background noise. How you say "no" to a tradition that excludes you. How you choose your community — you don't just inherit it. My citizenship was no longer about how my dad introduced me to his friends, but about how I built my own relationship with the state, with civil society, with the world.

Still, no matter how frustrated I get sometimes, I know and admit that I carry privileges. My sexual orientation doesn't disrupt the dominant model; I can easily pass as straight. I don't fit society's beauty standards, but I'm able-bodied — so I don't have to fight daily against infrastructures that ignore people with disabilities. I grew up in a working-class family that, though modest, offered just enough stability for me to build on, with a few sacrifices, who I am today.

Citizenship is also lived through the lens of race, class, bodies that are accepted, and bodies that are merely "tolerated." Even political participation is a luxury for some women. For me, going to a protest means I *can*. That I have time, resources, a relatively stable income, and a space where I'm not afraid to speak. But there are women for whom the "obligations" of being a mother, a daughter, a caregiver, mean there's no energy left for "active citizenship." And that's not a lack of will. It's structural inequality.

I've learned that classical liberalism sees me as an autonomous unit, capable of rational, equal decisions. But the reality is: we're not all starting from the same line. It took me a while to realize that sisterhood, the kind you see in Instagram quotes, is often more aspirational than lived. Not because it's not a beautiful idea — solidarity among women can be a form of survival and power. But the truth is, not all women face the same struggles, have the same chances, or the same room to speak. Some of us work in air-conditioned offices. Others clean them. Some write essays about representation. Others aren't represented anywhere.

Maybe I didn't learn what citizenship means from textbooks or civics class. I learned it from awkward dinner conversations, from disapproving looks when I said what I thought, from my girl friends who weren't believed, from the women who spoke up first. I learned it from my privileges too — the ones I only understood once I saw how absent they were for others. Being a citizen isn't just about obeying the law and paying taxes. It's about being present, aware, critical. It's about understanding that rights aren't always guaranteed equally. That between me and a refugee woman, a visibly queer woman, or a single mother in a rural area, stand structural differences — not just personal choices.