

LIVED STORIES. TOLD STORIES. PERSONAL NOTES

Exploring Experiences of Transgender Identity Development in Romania

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Abstract: This article is looking at gender identity as a range of beliefs, perceptions and experiences. These are shaped in a life-long process of self perception, often triggered by cognitive dissonance, and also by interacting with the forms of social and political power manifesting in an individual's milieu.¹ We focus on the beliefs and experiences of transgender persons with a view to explore their perceptions of their own gender and their take on how transphobia in Romania might be addressed effectively. For the purposes of this article, we have had interviews/correspondence with members of the Romanian transgender community.

Keywords: gender identity, transgender Romania, beliefs, social change.

Background: What shapes and moves Romanian gender norms?

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the conversation on transgender rights and legal gender recognition has gained momentum and even a few important victories – but not in Romania. Romanian society is miles behind mentalities, policy trends or academic discourse regarding gender diversity, compared to Malta, Germany, or Sweden, for example. In Romania the conversation is still dominated by straight cisgender ‘normal’ men – and priests. Power is fiercely defended by preservers of ‘family values’ or ‘our 2000-year old orthodox traditions’ – who often preach sexism or domestic ‘corrective’ violence as ‘god-ordained’ normalcy. Naturally, this state of affairs has a heavy impact on gender construction, maintenance and enforcement.

¹ Jeanne Marecek, Mary Crawford, and Danielle Popp, “On the Construction of Gender, Sex, and Sexualities,” in *The Psychology of Gender*, ed. Alice H. Eagly, Anne E. Beall, and Robert J. Sternberg (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2004), 192–216.



In this section we are going to discuss three of the most important determinants of Romanians' understanding and acceptance of gender diversity. We believe that it is useful for readers with less exposure to Romanian culture to get a gist of the general atmosphere in Romanian society as far as the discussion on gender identities, roles and expressions is concerned.

The Romanian Orthodox Church

In 2009, the US State Department's report on religious freedom said about the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR):

*'Due to its dominant role, the Romanian Orthodox Church has a substantial influence on the majority of the population and the legislators, and Orthodox religious leaders are the only ones participating in public events of national importance. Thus, many Orthodox leaders have appeared publicly alongside important politicians, and announcements from this religious institution often make political promises or lay forth political goals and support to certain political positions.'*²

Things have not changed much since this report was issued, quite the contrary: we're sitting on the brink of a national referendum costing well into an 11-digit figure (in Euros), which will make it even less likely in the near future for gay people to get married. The Orthodox Church keeps a strict watch over Romanian politicians, and many suspect the Church's leverage comes not only from politicians' thirst for image capital, but also from serious financial interests. BOR's assets and revenue are all tax-free. The overall worth of the Romanian Orthodox Church has been assessed at over 3 billion Euros – which puts it in the same league as oil company Petrom or the Romanian Commercial Bank, for example.³ In 2015 only, the net profit declared by BOR was almost 4 million Euros.⁴ The most dangerous effects of BOR's power can be found in the public system of education.

Bigotry in education

Although Romania is a lay country, religion is taught in all schools, K-12. It surreptitiously entered the stream in the early 90's and by the beginning of the new millennium it had become a by-default ingredient of the core curriculum at all levels. Alarm signals about infringements to freedom

² "Freedom of Religion Report" (Washington, DC: US State Department, 2009), <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/132848.pdf>.

³ "Averea Bisericii Ortodoxe Depaseste 3 Miliarde Euro," *Standard.Ro*, August 19, 2007, <https://www.money.ro/averea-bisericii-ortodoxe-depaseste-3-miliarde-euro-1/>.

⁴ Bianca Dobrescu, "Sfintele Afaceri Ale Bisericii Ortodoxe Române," *Capital.Ro*, June 22, 2016, <http://www.capital.ro/sfintele-afaceri-ale-bisericii-ortodoxe-romane.html>.

of conscience began to be raised by social sciences high school teacher Emil Moise in 2005 (the case against *icons* in public schools)⁵ and then again in the fall of 2012, when we formed a coalition of 30+ nonprofit organizations, which met with the Ministry of Education to insist that instead of it being an opt-out, confessional religion should be an opt-in class. This finally came through in 2014 thanks to the same Emil Moise, who took the case to the European Court for Human Rights: now, students are no longer by default registered for the religion class, but have to opt in – meaning their parents have to write file a request that their child be registered for this class. In reality, students who do not attend religion are either bullied by religious teachers for being an ‘atheist!’ or their parents sign them up for the class against their own beliefs, because schools do not offer alternative activities/spaces – which makes safety an major issue in Romanian schools.

What makes the presence of confessional religion, priests and such, so problematic for gender inclusive education is that it maintains codes of behavior inside a very patriarchal, sexist, homophobic and transphobic frame. Teachers continue to say things like: ‘Well, you’re actually not bad at all in Maths, for a girl,’ ‘Mihai, don’t move your hands like that when you talk – what are you, gay?’, ‘What kind of girl are you, look at your hair and your clothes!.’

At the same time, if a girl comes to school dressed as if she will go to a club straight after school, few if any will comment – and male teachers will remark on a female student’s prurience openly, in the school staff room.

Media sensationalism

There is little of note in the Romanian mass-media regarding trans persons – in the sense that the coverage is quite uniformly presenting self-objectified and self-oversexualized trans women like Naomi or Rodica Moroșanca.⁶ In the host’s and therefore public eye, these persons are men, dressed as women – therefore what they are retained as is gay men – especially as they sometimes make sexual allusions to male hosts or other guests.⁷ Perhaps one of the most negative effects this kind of coverage has is precisely on the beliefs of members of the LGBTQIA+ community itself. The over-self-sexualization of these women is seen as an embarrassment by many LGBTQIA+ persons who

⁵ “CNCD Decision 323/2006,” *Wikipedia*, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CNCD_Decision_323/2006

⁶ For an example of a self-sexualized trans person who enforces the general confusion gender versus sex, and also rubs many transgender persons the wrong way: <http://www.stiridecluj.ro/divertisment/bataie-la-emisiunea-acces-direct-video>. The video is in Romanian, but it’s really not consequential if you do not speak Romanian.

⁷ Anca Simionescu, “ROMANII AU TALENT. SEXY MOROSANCA s-a Dat La Smiley in Culise,” *Evz.Ro*, March 8, 2014, <http://evz.ro/romanii-au-talent-sexy-morosanca-s-a-dat-la-smiley-in-culise-1085989.html>.

consider themselves as ‘proper’ people. We would like to note here that the over-self-sexualization is done in the belief that that’s what a ‘real’ woman is like: make up, breasts, augmented lips, high heels. If you are a trans woman, it is natural to overdo these characteristics in the first stage of your transition – sort of catching up on all the lost years when you had to dress like a man – or as a rule, if you are a performer or other professional who gets a lot of attention. In this same passage we must mention also that ‘passing’ (passing unnoticed, not as trans; fitting in) is something that is often made fun of by the media: cameras zoom in on trans women’s lips, breasts or hips for no reason, the comments to the trans woman’s answers are sarcastic etc. This entertains the public – and sells. So why change it?

Even less biased coverage, like trans activist Sasha Ichim’s 2013 interview⁸, repeats the mistake of insisting on sexuality as a clarifier of ‘what’ exactly this ‘transsexual’ person is: gay or straight?! The interviewee is talking about judges and gender politics in the family, and ambassadors and such – but the interviewer goes back to ‘so how do you have sex’ type of questions a few times.

However, while presenting non-cisgender persons in the media sells, we would not say this happens too often. So we would end this section with the observation that the media does have a penchant for sensationalism when it comes to trans identities, journalists exercise much caution, or much control is exercised on them, that the quantity is not too big – due the general public’s rejection of ‘too much’ on this type of subject. Ultimately, media outlets’ priority is that they do not lose viewers/readers.

On a positive note, the most recent (to date) coverage of transgender life in Romania comes from ‘Stiri de Iasi’, in the form of two wonderfully unbiased pieces, albeit with sensationalist titles – a good strategy to attract but also educate readers on what transgender means. The author makes no reference to sexual or romantic intimacy, which is a definite glimmer of hope.⁹

⁸ Sabina Fati, “Interviu Cu Sasha Ichim, Transsexual: „Sunt Judecători Care Spun Că Suntem Niște Monștri”,” *Romania libera*, June 9, 2013, <https://romanalibera.ro/opinii/interviuri/interviu-cu-sasha-ichim-transsexual-sunt-judecatori-care-spun-ca-suntem-niste-monstri-304217.html>.

⁹ Emilia Nedelcoff, “Povestea Mariei Care Vrea Sa Fie Matei: ”Doamne, Fă Să-Mi Crească Cuc!”,” *Stirideiasi.Ro*, March 31, 2018, <https://www.stirideiasi.ro/povestea-mariei-care-vrea-sa-fie-matei-doamne-fa-sa-mi-creasca-cuc> and Emilia Nedelcoff, “E Băiat, Dar Stă În Camera de Cămin Cu Fetele. Pentru Că În Buletin e Și El Fată,” *Stirideiasi.Ro*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.stirideiasi.ro/e-baiat-dar-sta-camera-de-camin-cu-fetele-pentru-ca-buletin-e-si-el-fata>.

Conceptual frame

Gender is often used interchangeably with ‘sex’. However, as gender diversity is gaining recognition in some parts of the world, public policies and institutions are beginning to integrate an increased social awareness that gender is rather the expectations and beliefs associated with people endowed with certain physical characteristics. These beliefs and expectations are often short-handed as ‘norms,’ built around a binary (male-female) axis: the idea that we ‘naturally’ identify as either male or female. The nature-nurture debate regarding gender is still very much on: is our gender identity rooted in biology, in other words born ‘naturally’ as an effect of the biological characteristics we are born with, and only refine-shaped by culture and socialization? Or is it molded socially, culturally – with biology playing a secondary role? In the discussion of our findings, we will look at whether/how the interviewees relate to the nature/nurture debate and whether this has an effect on their self-perceived gender identity.

Gender roles and expression norms/beliefs are also of great importance in any discussions related to gender conformity or recognition. The expectations of society and oneself to perform certain functions in certain ways are very important in the process of self-realization, for healthy social interactions. In weighing the potentiality of social change, we must consider both internal and external awareness of how these expected roles have come to be. To avoid any ambiguity: personal identification of one’s own gender is nothing to be debated; internal awareness of gender roles or gender expression can, however, be the direct reflection of societal norms and our allegiance to them, born out of a desire to belong, to be safe, or both.

Our individual and collective psyches are deeply imbued by historically, geographically, socially and culturally constructed notions of (the roles and expressions of) masculinity, femininity and (if the case) neither or both. Without prompting any guidance, most of us never come to realize that what we hold as profoundly intimate beliefs, or other psychological triggers of behavior, attitudes, even emotions, are not only the result of socialization and discipline by parents and others, but also the reflection of practices and interests that meddle with our self-awareness and construction of our selves in rather perverse and insidiously intrusive ways. But does that make our beliefs false – or wrong? My answer is that when it comes to gender, there is no wrong answer.

If we stop to look at two of the oldest explicitly acknowledged transgender identities – South-Asian hijras and Native-American two-spirit people – this approach may seem less radical. While hijra means neither male, nor female, two-spirit means both. Both identities were socially integrated

for millennia before heteronormativity became an instrument of political power and coerced conformity. Nowadays, two-spirit people are trying to regain the respect and security severely damaged by white christian colonialism. The surviving 500 nations native to the North American continent still use a wide range of terms on the 4 main gender axes they operate with: feminine woman, masculine woman, feminine man, masculine man. Two-spirit is a pan-nation or pan-tribe term, sometimes confused with gay and native American, often appropriated by non-native persons – but definitely a term that incorporates feminine and masculine, regardless of biology. Hijra, on the other hand, is a term that means neither male, nor female – again, biology is dismissed, although in some South-Asian countries hijra do sometimes undergo castration rituals/surgery. It is in addition imbued with the social, cultural and political consequences of the economic precarity, high HIV infection rates, sex work and/or begging as often integral parts of hijra communities. Spirituality also plays a huge part in how hijras are integrated in South-Asian societies. Interestingly, despite high levels of transphobia, hate crime and hate-speech, South-Asian trans activism has been instrumental to the passing of third-gender recognition – first in Asian countries like Nepal, India, Thailand, and now also in European countries like Germany or Austria. Two-spirit and hijra can be intersex, but that is not the norm. Hence, we can conclude that being aware of one’s biology plays a role in realizing one’s gender identity only inasmuch as it leads to an awareness of the norms regulating the social functioning of a body. If these norms are very constricting and there is danger for one’s physical, social and emotional well-being, naturally cognitive dissonance will break the self-perception process – as we will see in some of the findings below, and the ensuing discussion.

Finally, before going into the presentation and discussion of our findings, let us lay forward 3 key concepts for our discussion. They have already been integrated in this conceptual frame already, but for the sake of academic convention, we will now offer an explicit albeit brief discussion of what they mean, and what makes them relevant to our topic.

Self perception

Observation of own behavior is what makes self perception possible; people understand how they feel and what they believe by paying attention to how they behave.¹⁰

¹⁰ Daryl Bem, “Self-Perception Theory,” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. Leonard Berkowitz, vol. 6 (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1972), 1–63.

Self-knowledge is essential for decision-making, therefore for moving forward with one's life. When individuals are not self-aware and especially when they are forced away from self-knowledge into conformity at all costs, the body of society, as that of the individual, can be but corrupt, unhealthy. The outcome of poor self-knowledge allows for totalitarianism and/or crime as norm. This is highly relevant for our discussion, given that Romanian society is still dominated by patriarchy in social and political structures (see Background notes on the Romanian Orthodox Church below), which means that self perception is not only not socially enforced as a positive thing, as in most collectivist societies, but is often detracted or corrupted through social control under different forms, as we will see in the findings and ensuing discussion below.

Cognitive dissonance

This is a clash between an individual's preferences, values, 'normality' – and what they are told these should be, ought be, they should enjoy or have.¹¹ In dealing with this dissonance, individuals clarify their values and identities – which sometimes means conforming and embracing something they do not feel is their own view or identity, but that seems safe and gives them the security of acceptance from the larger community. This is actually often the case of LGBTQIA+ persons, as we will see in some of their accounts below.

Social control

Social control is exercised through rules and norms that are internalized by individuals, who will voluntarily refrain from expressing or committing certain things, so as to remain tied to the larger community.¹² Initially used to explore and understand criminal deviance, it was expanded in the direction of identity mechanics with the birth of queer theory. Thus, heteronormativity is power exercised through social control: individuals experience personal self-perception crises and stigmatization/exclusion if they do not match the profile of 'normal' gender identity. Moreover, they internalize hetero-'normality' so deeply, that self-acceptance is a very long process in the case of

¹¹ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (California: Stanford University Press, 1957).

¹² John E. Farley, *Sociology* (Prentice Hall, 1990).

LGBTQIA+ persons, especially when pathologization is also involved – like in the case of transgender persons.¹³

Finally, a note on Foucault’s ‘biopower.’ He begins his ‘History of Human sexuality’ by questioning the 20th century Western belief that, beginning with late 17th century until quite well into the 20th century, open mention of sexually-related matters was repressed, due to the ascent of the bourgeoisie and capitalism. He calls this the ‘repressive hypothesis’ and from it he traces the emergence of sexuality as a construct used to control people and power.¹⁴ In the shift of power defined not so much as ‘the right to death’ (feudal lords could rightfully kill virtually anybody anytime) but more like ‘the right to live’, modern states now exercise ‘biopower.’ This biopower is built on the outlook of the human body as a machine – which can and should be disciplined and optimized in the name of ‘safety and progress.’

Thesis statement

Gender recognition in Romania, socially and legally, is dependent on the interactions between the gender-related beliefs and experiences of gender-conforming and gender-diverse persons, legislators, judges, public and social institutions. These interactions need to be documented and put forth for a discussion on gender recognition to become possible in our country. This is why our thesis is not a hypothesis, a contention – but rather a first attempt to make Romanian transgender voices heard in an academic journal, speaking about those interactions that need to be documented towards legal recognition and social acceptance of gender diversity. In this first contribution, we are exploring what are some of the things that shape transgender people’s gender-related beliefs, how/when people become aware of these beliefs as their ‘own’ – and how social control is exercised in the process of self-realization, acceptance and affirmation.

Findings and discussion

For the purposes of this article, we have interviewed 10 Romanian transgender persons between the ages of 25 and 35. We have used these questions to guide our discussions:

¹³ While in June 2018 the World Health Organization moved ‘gender incongruence’ from the mental health disorders section to the sexual health conditions, this news is expected by trans activists to take a long time before it reaches the practice of Romanian law and the medical professionals. In support of this, we still do not have any protocols or standards binding legal or medical professionals in cases of legal cases or medical care.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (London: Allen Lane, 1979).

- When did you first become consciously aware of what it means to be boy or girl?
- How do you think you came to have these notions?
- What about other people's beliefs about what it means to be a boy or a girl?
- How did you become aware of them, and what impact did it have on you/your beliefs?
- What would be most effective in re-shaping/influencing Romanian's beliefs about gender – especially those beliefs which propagate transphobia and homophobia?

Below we will paste selections from the participants' discourse in response to above prompts, as well as a brief analysis for each discussion we have had – the analysis will also make reference to points in the discussions and personal observations of the interviewer, who has had a long-standing friendship with some of the interviewees.

My voice has always been too shrill and thin, not masculine at all, this has always been a disappointment for me. I guess I might have taken up smoking when I was very young in hopes that my voice would get thicker. When I was in middle school, I was very tall and big, and I was always hanging out with the boys. But when I would speak, they would say I'm making fun of them (If you have that voice, why are you so big?! What kind of girl are you?!) and then I would be bullied and beaten. My mom's reaction when I told her I thought boys were cooler and that I wanted to be more with them than with girls: oh my god, you'll be the village slut!

What we first notice in this answer is the respondent's reference to early dissonance caused by self-disappointment with own not-masculine-enough voice, which led to bullying, which then led to a coping behaviour (smoking) to alleviate it. Based on my empirical observations in the pre-teen and teen years of our respondent, bullying was doubled by self-harmful behaviour for a good 2-3 years, thus emphasizing the subject's internalization of the bullies' message that they were less valuable as a human being for not sounding like a man and not behaving and looking like a 'proper' girl. The (biological) mother the respondent lived with was never supportive of their non-conformity to binary gender patterns, and since early childhood criticized their opinions and behavior – see above for the parent taking completely amiss the child's preference to spend time with boys more than with girls. While socialization was not forced upon the respondent, and thus could not have contributed to social control in their case, social control was performed through constant bullying and stress of having to justify and defend their opinions, outfits, behaviours.

Transphobia and homophobia will be combated if we patiently and calmly try to influence people's mentalities, by offering information on gender and sexuality and being more visible in the public space. Unfortunately in Romania gender identity and sexual orientation are confused by most, and both of them are understood as sexual

practices. If we continue to give people correct information about these things, eventually the public image of the (trans) community will be de-sexualized. I am very against negative visibility, due to the fact that 80% of the people I interact with socially associate the LGBTQIA+ community with ‘clownery, circus, lack of education, sexualization...’ I am a great supporter of positive visibility in the public space, and educating society gradually and correctly.

This respondent preferred to focus on the last question in our discussion guide: how to effectively re-shape Romanian people’s beliefs about gender. The confusion between sex and gender is seen as harmful because it makes people confuse identity with sexual preference. Education (and time!) as well as positive visibility are offered as ways to change transphobic and homophobic mentalities. While we agree fully with what the respondent is proposing, we would like to point out that the bigotry in our education system and the prevalent sensationalism of media coverage (see background section) make the outlook appear quite grim.

Boy, girl, non-binary – in the end what it comes down to is what your heart tells you. These are innate positive identities, which can only be felt – like sexual orientation. These things cannot be seen. Fortunately they are natural and diverse, and most importantly they are only reflected by your feelings. Gender identity is like this too. I am repeating myself but these are positive and innate characteristics – like the colour of your eyes, hair, skin etc.

We will label this response as the ‘this is just who I am’ type. In this type of response, there is no apparent dissonance, and self-awareness is rooted strongly in the biological and psychological. It could be acknowledged that this type of attitude might be a coping mechanism too, given that this transgender woman did decide to emigrate outside of Romania to a Western European country, and was able to have surgeries and live openly as herself without fear of mistreatment, isolation and precarity – as most MTF (male-to-female) women in Romanian society. This respondent is a very loving and good-vibes person, often posting positive and motivational message on her social media; her contribution to the virtual transgender community is as refreshing as it is singular.

*To understand how gender, sex**, and sometimes gender identity are perceived and learned in Romanian culture, we must look throughout the entire and diverse spectrum of cultures, created in every social category. Intersectionality is the mother of us all. I want that Romanians stop hating transgender and transvestite and gender diverse people and understand how we can fix this. One must look at what unites us all, and that is: fear of the unknown. Look around. People that know stuff about gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexuality, sociology, psychology etc are not afraid of gender and sex diverse people.’*

In this response education, or knowledge expansion, is again offered as a solution to social change. The mentioning of intersectionality is most interesting, as it points to the need to customize approaches so as to suit the different coexisting cultures in our country. This is very relevant as there is indeed a great divide between the Romanian majority and the largest ethnic minority, the Roma (estimated at around 4 million). And since we have mentioned this, I feel compelled to say that Romania remains a violently racist country. There is also a growing religious diversity, as well as an ever-increasing number of Romanians working and living abroad and supporting and influencing their families here. This means that, while homophobia and transphobia are strong across ethnic, social status or religious groups, the intersections between their beliefs about gender nonconformity and their experience of it may take different forms and expressions, socially and politically.

I was aware of the difference between sex and gender thanks to other people. I wasn't really aware of much at that point, and was just starting to learn about how diverse everything in the world actually is. I met someone who didn't identify as a man or a woman, and that definitely opened my eyes. I then had a very close person figuring out they were agender, and, later, another close person figuring out he was a trans man. So by that time I had done some research and it was obvious there was a huge difference between gender and sex. I do think half of it is related to gender roles, and I wonder how the world would be if those didn't exist at all. But I also know it is very much an internal thing as well, not just dependent on society's expectations. I do know nonconforming cis people, men who wear make-up or masculine women, who still are men and women, but who don't agree with what society asks of them as men or women. [I like makeup and skirts and stuff, so I am almost always seen as my assigned sex, a woman. I like looking cute, but I don't feel like a woman, no matter how femme I look, my internal sense is still set on what I can vaguely describe as neutral]. I myself figured out I was non-binary some time ago, quite late, to be fair, and, luckily, I already had the vocabulary. I don't suffer from dysphoria, I like my body quite a lot and don't want to make any changes in a transition sense. I don't, however, feel that my gender is my body, at all. Or what society thinks it should be, at least.

This person was just over 20 when they started meeting people of diverse identities under the trans umbrella. This helped a lot with self-perception, as the person was able to observe their own reactions and feelings when interacting with other nonconforming persons. This also stimulated them to do research and thus better realize their own gender identity as non-binary. Another important idea touched on here is the dissonance between gender expression and gender identity: cisgender men who wear make-up etc. Thus, the ways in which someone dresses/makes up, speaks/moves are not indicative of their gender identity. Finally, this person makes it clear that they feel gender identity and biology are completely unrelated. The absence of dysphoria and the

lack of interest in (medical) transition are also elements that support this respondent's perception of own gender as not connected with their biology, and the experiences that clarified that perception.

'I never thought much about gender norms or expression, because they didn't mean so much to me. But when I was little, I had to confront them quite a bit because of my parents: my haircut, my outfits, my toys, my behavior – they had a say in all of these. I became aware of other people's notions of boy or girl long before I had my own, and I took them at face value: boys are like this, girls like that. This gave me a strong sense of inadequacy, which haunted me up to the moment I started my transition.'

This is a classical example of dissonance and struggle with self-acceptance and social integration. In this transgender man's experience, what dispelled the dissonance and led to self-acceptance was the beginning of HRT (testosterone, in this case). Perhaps it might be relevant to add that, about a year after starting HRT, this person started the process of applying and interviewing for employment in a Western European country, where surgeries are covered by insurance. His quality of life improved substantially after completing the goal of emigration to his satisfaction.

'Romania is dominated by preconceived ideas about gender, which affects not only trans persons, but also cisgender ones, and with heavy consequences – like domestic violence. A loosening in the strictness of the expectations related to gender identity and expression should not be just the fight of queer people and their allies for recognition and acceptance. It shouldn't be ignored by the many, under the excuse that 'I have nothing against them, let them do what they want.' Changing the general opinion about gender norms begins with awakening people to the idea that contesting gender roles is not something exclusive to queer people or feminists, and that it is something that needs to happen to the benefit of the entire society.'

This contribution has a strong message related to social control, and it links transphobia to sexism and violence in the family. While no concrete way towards the 'awakening' is offered here, there is clear urgency and a very relevant discussion of the oppressive potential of traditional/strictly binary gender norms.

Conclusion

From media sensationalism to the influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church on political discourse and mainstream mentalities imbued through the education system, the Romanian public's personal beliefs related to 'normal' womanhood or manhood are laden with patriarchal or pathological gibberish.

The perceptions and experience of own gender identity among the Romanian transgender persons we have talked to are often laden with cognitive dissonance resulting from the clash between their own normality and that imposed by their milieu – same-age peers, family. Self-perception of own gender identity is a process influenced both by this dissonance but also, in some cases, by a clarity coming ‘from the heart’ or from expanding one’s social milieu to include more and more gender diverse persons.

As far as re-shaping beliefs related to what gender identity is, and what constitutes ‘normal’ behaviour/expression of one’s gender identity, our interviewees have repeatedly iterated the importance of education, with one emphasizing the value of positive visibility and another one the merits of reshaping these beliefs not only for the benefit of transgender persons, but for a healthier society for cisgender persons as well.

For ‘what now’, we leave you with the words of Michel Foucault, to whom we admit to being subjective: *There exists an international citizenry that has its rights, and has its duties, and that is committed to rise up against every abuse of power; no matter who the author, no matter who the victims. After all, we are all ruled, and as such, we are in solidarity.*¹⁵

We end with the words of a Romanian transgender activist calling to action in the same spirit as our last interviewee in the findings section: awaken and fight, for the sake of all.

*In a corrupt state people are desperate. The social status gap is enormous. In a corrupt state there are HARD working people that are poor. There is frustration. Unhealed frustrations lead to violence. If you allow the right to be master of your own sex and sexuality to be taken away from the masses, then you’ll be part of turning those masses into puppets ready to kill and go to war and beat and torture and murder trans people, gay people, gender diverse people, Roma people, black people, sex workers, drug addicts, homeless people.*¹⁶

¹⁵ See Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Eribon’s most reputable biographer quotes Foucault as saying this during their discussions.

¹⁶ My friend prefers to not be named. I am leaving here my warm thanks for all the help with this article – and for the patience and trust to share so many things with me along the years.