

## “I was both the man and the woman”: Gender stratification in communist and post-communist Romania

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the recent history of gender stratification in Romania. Based upon research among working-class retirees in Galați, it juxtaposes the gendering of work in the communist period with that of retirement in the post-communist years. That women were burdened with labor in the domestic realm and either, or sometimes both, the agricultural or industrial sectors during the communist period only to enter protracted poverty when they retired after 1989 is underscored, the life histories of two women illustrating this process. One is of a woman who labored in textiles while raising children all but alone because her husband held work outside the city. The other is of a woman who conducted agriculture while also caring for the household. Both women suffered physically from the work they performed, but the demands also had psychological ramifications. The textile worker describes feeling pressure to ensure that she reared children who would not become vagabonds, while the other reflects on the anxiety that she suffered attempting to do all her work. A key point that emerges from these life histories is that women arguably braved even more intense expectations than men upon their work lives. Greatly exacerbating this injustice was the fact that women were never compensated for waged labor at the same rates as men, and their household tasks were never remunerated at all. In addition to the lower pay, women accrued smaller pensions than men if they earned one at all. Retirement in the post-communist has as a result been crushing particularly to women. They have not had the income to manage expenses in a rapidly changing economy. This has made it difficult for women to bear the costs of necessities, and it impels them to engage in range of strategies that often heighten the stress that poverty already generates.

**Keywords:** gender inequality; work; retirement; pensions; communism; post-communism.



## Introduction

“Oh, woe is me, how am I going to manage,” were words you would not hear from her mouth, Raluca<sup>1</sup> told me during an interview in the year of her retirement from a strenuous, three-decade career in the textile industry. I had invited her to participate in the interview, which was part of my research as a doctoral candidate in anthropology on the lives of retired people during the post-communist period in Galați, Romania, a city that was undergoing steep industrial decline. By those words, Raluca explicitly meant she could handle the adversity that had come to typify life in Romania just as she had dealt with the many exigencies she had faced coming of age, building a career and raising a family during the communist period. But her statement spoke of more than hardiness in trying times. It also reflected the fact that being a working-class woman, both in the communist period and in its aftermath, had not been a carefree experience, even for a person of some means like her. And it furthered my knowledge of the differences between women’s and men’s lives in Romania.

This paper explores the lives of working-class women like Raluca in both the communist and post-communist periods in Galați. My primary goal is to shed light on gender inequality in both eras. I show that women of working-class background, despite significant variation within their ranks, were encumbered by a staggering amount of work in different sectors of the economy under communism. In other words, they strove through a hefty double burden. Although this is not to say that working-class men were not as well compelled to complete daunting work tasks in both historical periods, particularly when it came to constructing and operating heavy industry, the pressures faced by women were arguably even more intense due to the fact that many household duties were their responsibility more than men’s, even as they devoted themselves to work in industry or cooperative farming. Magnifying this imbalance further, women were never paid as much, nor ever received the same bounty of retirement benefits, as men, which greatly contributed to the feminization of poverty among working-class pensioners that I observed firsthand during months of research. A central response to these conditions, as I have already shown with Raluca, has been to bear the weight with considerable fortitude, even being driven at times by a sense of moral obligation. The impact has been far-reaching, women of working-class background in

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<sup>1</sup> All names used in this text are pseudonyms. I have also altered some details of people’s backgrounds in order to protect their identities.

Romania suffering from various health conditions to a greater extent than their counterparts in western European societies.

### **Gender at the cusp of revolution**

When the communist period began in the late 1940s, the majority of people in Romania – 76.5% in 1948 (Montias 1967:29) – lived in rural areas, and most of them worked in agriculture, industrial development having commenced to only a limited extent in a few urban areas (Brezeanu and Munteanu 1972:142-144). Their day-to-day lives were insecure due to very modest material conditions, especially in the southern and eastern regions of the country, which had been historically shaped by different imperial authority than in Transylvania and other parts of western Romania (Hitchins 1994:338-345). Equipment for conducting agriculture – e.g., tractors, ploughs, combines – was not widely available (Berend 1985:194-196), requiring people to use their own labor and simple tools to work the land. This included women, who participated in agricultural work as much as men (Scurtu 2003:157-158).

Access to health care services was negligible for rural dwellers in this period. Very few physicians served the population, and village inhabitants had little or no income to spend on consultations and treatment (Gheorghiu 1937, cited in Scurtu 2003:169, Golopenția and Georgescu 1941:268-287, 290). Consequently, it was very common for women to give birth at home with at most the assistance of a midwife who lacked formal training (Scurtu *op. cit.*:157), and people depended heavily on home remedies to treat ailments, which they often attributed to supernatural forces (Kligman 1977). The lack of availability of health care services, a nutritionally inadequate diet and overwork contributed to a comparatively high rate of infant mortality and low life expectancy. In the late 1930s, on average there were 17.6 deaths per 100 live births, a figure that was higher even than in some other Balkan countries, including Albania and Yugoslavia. Life expectancy was 42 years in 1932 and between the two world wars remained eight years below the rates of many other European societies (Șandru 1980:15, 203).

Although work in agriculture was carried out by men and women (as well as children), other tasks were strictly gendered, according to some scholars. Scurtu, for example, describes men performing (*op. cit.*:157-158) tasks outside – cutting wood for heating and cooking, looking after domesticated animals and repairing broken equipment – while women were occupied with activities indoors – cooking, spinning cotton into thread that they wove into apparel and other fabrics, and cleaning. Harsanyi largely concurs with this depiction of work in peasant communities

in Romania, stating that “[t]he woman is responsible for work in the home, the bearing and raising of children. The man is the provider whose main work lies outside the home” (1993:39-40). She elaborates on this portrayal by probing the ideas that accompanied it. Rural women were viewed as “[e]motionally weaker” and “naturally inclined toward the ‘non-rational’” while men were seen as “aggressive, emotionally independent, and sexually demanding.” Due to this, tasks that were emotionally and, I would add, spiritually significant – “birth, baptism, wedding, bringing up children, illness, death” – were relegated to women and gave them “a kind of power” (op. cit.:40)

These accounts of the gendered division of labor in the period immediately prior to the onset of communist rule, though instructive, are likely too general, interpersonal, familial and regional variation debatably abounding for many reasons. The divide in them between public and private spheres may to a degree be more stereotypical than real, an argument I base predominantly upon life histories I gathered of people born in the interwar period. For example, Victoria, a woman I came to know particularly well who was born in a Moldavian village in the thirties, described the at times backbreaking work both in- and outdoors she was made to perform as a teenager in addition to toiling in the fields with hoe, sickle and other handheld implements. She made rugs from hemp, an arduous process involving many steps, and cultivated silk cocoons, details of which I present elsewhere (Weber 2014). I learned from this one woman’s life history alone that a straightforward division between outdoor and indoor did not appear to so easily characterize rural women and men’s work. Still, Scurtu and Harsanyi are accurate in saying that women and men were socialized to perform quite different tasks and to spend time in gender-divided social milieux. These divisions continued – and emerged in new forms – under communism.

### **Gender and Communism**

Party leaders enacted a series of socially and economically transformative policies with the ascendancy of communism. One of the most ambitious was the commitment of government revenue to education. According to one anthropologist, it resulted in an approximately 300% increase in people’s enrollment in primary and secondary schooling from 1938 to 1960 (Kideckel 1993:83), all but eradicating illiteracy, which was still very common especially among girls and women in rural areas during the interwar years (Hitchens op. cit.:344, János 1998:98-99). Substantial growth of post-secondary education in science and technology also ensued, affording thousands the opportunity to be trained in engineering, metallurgy, machine-building, agriculture, chemistry, mathematics, physics, medicine and related fields (Gilberg 1975:97-118).

Women as well as men, including many from rural areas, saw their lives transform as a result of this investment. Raluca, the woman who spent her career in textiles, was sent in her youth from her village to live in the district capital, so that she could earn a high school diploma, later moving to Galați to attend a technical school. This gave her the skills to eventually become occupied in textiles. Many other women of rural background not only in Romania but also in other countries of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were similarly educated, which led to an increase in the participation of women in the labor force across the region (Scott 1976:72-93). This process was, however, gendered, women and men being coached in fields deemed appropriate to their natures, which meant in the case of Romania that women became skilled in especially large numbers in health care, education and accounting (Wolfe Jancar 1978:13). A similar configuration existed throughout the Soviet bloc, large percentages of women being schooled in health services; finance; education; culture and art; trade; administration; and agriculture and forestry, while in many of those countries women were trained in comparatively small percentages in communications; science and scientific services; industry; housing and construction; and transportation (Wolfe Jancar op. cit.:21). Women who did undergo training in industrial manufacturing in Romania became employed in light industries, such as textiles, food processing and cosmetics (Moskoff 1978:449), a path that women also followed in other eastern bloc countries. In Bulgaria, for example, the largest percentage of women trained in industrial skills worked in textile manufacturing, leather- and shoemaking, publishing and food processing, far fewer taking up positions in electrical engineering, metallurgy, fuel refining, machine production and woodworking (Wolfe Jancar op. cit.:24).

Technical training of women was by no means universal in Romania, however. Women instead continued in large numbers to labor in non-technical capacities in agriculture, so much so that by 1970 nearly 66% of women active in the labor force worked on cooperative farms while only 17% were employed in industry, making farming a distinctly feminized sector of the economy (Ionescu 1973, cited in Cernea 1978:112). Men did, however, continue to participate in agrarian labor in their villages when they were not at work in factories near cities since they still lived in the countryside and often commuted daily to those jobs. This took place because cities did not have the housing and urban infrastructure that would have allowed rural families to settle in at the same time as employment in manufacturing surged (Moskoff op. cit.:443). Thus, people's connection to rural life remained strong even though the formation of a new social class structure

was under way, a pattern observed at the time in other eastern European countries as well. (See, e.g., Creed 1998, Halpern 1956, and Simić 1973.)

The wages and retirement benefits associated with these different fields of employment reflected the priorities of the communist government. A strong commitment to industrialize the economy, despite resistance from some members of the Comecon (Montias 1964), was coupled with the distribution of substantially higher salaries (Cole 1976:254-256), as well as more generous pensions (Ghimpu, et al. 1998), for occupations in industrial manufacturing. Sectors of industrial employment that were feminized were less well paid and came with less substantial retirement benefits than those populated by men (Wolfe Jancar op. cit.:25-28), echoing the lower importance associated with work women performed. As a result, women in general lost out relative to men in the communist economy, earning lower wages and accruing less lavish pensions. On top of this, women continued to carry out the bulk of household labor, including raising children, cooking and cleaning for no compensation because the Romanian state never set up a scheme to extend income for domestic labor just as it did not invest sufficiently in childcare facilities. Men did, though, participate in cultivating the small plot of land accorded rural families by the state and helped out on cooperative farms especially during the harvest (Cole op. cit.:257-258). This structure held steady despite some effort to entice men to engage in household labor to help out their wives (Massino 2010). Lying behind such endeavors was an ideology of gender parity associated with the construction of a communist society. Those efforts were largely unpersuasive, the majority of household work remaining women's duty, a conclusion to which other researchers of the region have also come (Ghodsee 2017:109).

### **Ethnographic Perspectives**

The two women I have already introduced illustrate well the imprint of the social and economic transformation of Romania during the communist period upon working-class women. Born in the late 1940s, Raluca, the textile worker, offered a rich account of her life, including many details of the work she performed over many decades. She began her career in textiles, got married and started having children in the late 1960s. Her husband was frequently absent from home due to his occupation in the housing industry, which regularly sent him to other parts of the country for several months at a time. *"You can imagine what this meant,"* she insisted, continuing with *"I*

*was both the man and the woman because I was mostly alone. It was really difficult...I took care of the children and everything else.”*

She and her husband had two children, a daughter and a son, to whom she dedicated herself, devoting considerable time and energy to their upbringing: *“I took care of them. To me the most important thing is family, children...You can even be unhappy in your marriage, but if you have children, you have to stay with them and raise them.”* She continued:

*“I worked to be sure that I did not produce children who would be a cost to society...because, later on, when they grew older, I knew that society would condemn me if this had happened, saying that I did not know how to educate and raise children. Have you seen people who are thieves, vagabonds? Society condemns the mother because of how they’ve become, saying that she did not know how to educate them...”*

Harboring this strong sense of accountability, Raluca went so far as to instruct her children in how to do farm work, which she continued to occasionally perform even though they lived in Galați. *“I would say to them ‘we must go to the fields and hoe so that we will have food to eat.’”* She continued with *“I raised them in the ‘cult of work.’ I didn’t coddle them, saying ‘oh, I see your little hands are hurting you.’”*

Meanwhile, her occupation in textiles consumed a substantial amount of time and energy. Raluca regularly worked the nightshift, telling me that that was “what we women did.”<sup>2</sup> Added to this punishing schedule was an unhealthy work environment, Raluca describing being surrounded by dust, lint and loud noise and regularly handling lubricants that were noxious. Promotions ultimately led to her becoming an inspector of textile mills, a position that was also very demanding. Although she earned a living wage, which was the case for most people under communism, and accumulated a better-than-average pension, the impact upon her health of all the work in combination with other circumstances, particularly the austerity of the 1980s that reduced revenue for the health care system, appeared to be considerable. When I met her, she was in her fifties and suffered from cardiovascular problems, a thyroid condition, rheumatism and osteoporosis. She believed her illnesses were the result of the difficulties and anxiety she had experienced raising children more or less on her own and working in the textile industry.

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<sup>2</sup> I never learned who looked after the children while she worked at night. It is unlikely that it was her mother because she lived at some distance, making such an arrangement impractical. Her children did likely spend summers at the grandmother’s home in the countryside, however, a practice that was customary in Romania at the time.

Victoria, the woman who was born in the interwar period, remained in the countryside until the 1980s, when she was in her forties. Her life followed a very different trajectory than Raluca's, yet, to reemphasize, it was even more representative of rural women's experiences under communism than Raluca's. Victoria completed only four years of school, which all but destined her for a life in agriculture and domestic work. Her husband also followed a well tread path, commuting to Galați for years for work in the steel manufacturing plant.

Among Victoria's many accomplishments were raising three children; working on the local, cooperative farm; tending to the household garden; keeping the home in order; preparing meals; looking after her husband's grandmother (who for a time resided with them); and building the home in which they lived. She had conflicting sentiments about of all the work she had accomplished. On the one hand, she was very proud of having shown to others that she was not a "lazy, good-for-nothing person," characterizing a typical day in her life in the village in the following manner:

*"I would come home [from the fields in the early morning] and look through the window to see if the kids had gotten up. If they weren't up, I would again return to the fields and finish what I needed to do on that day. After that, I would come home, the kids would be a mess, so I would clean them and change their clothes. I'd send them outside, spread a blanket under a tree in the courtyard, and I'd feed them. After that, I'd go inside to clean up after the kids, and after that I'd stick my legs in the clay, mixing it with water using my feet. In winter, the water was really cold. It would 'cut me' on the legs. From this I would make wattle.*

On the other hand, she became worn down by the unrelenting nature of her responsibilities. As a result, the work began to have an impact on her mental health, which she described in the following way:

*When I'd come home [from the fields], I'd have so much to do with the kids. You can imagine how I'd find them at home. They were young, one was two years old, the other three. I began to receive treatment in order to keep things together because I was agitated all the time and upset over the direction my life had taken. I didn't have anyone to complain to so I kept it all inside of me and it really began to eat me up... So I went to the doctor, who told me I needed to calm myself down. I didn't have anyone to tell*

*my problems to. There was no one to talk to about all of the things that were bothering me, and since I couldn't take it anymore and was just complaining to myself, the doctor gave me pills.*

But her suffering went beyond the psychological. She also experienced a number of physical ailments, including a ruptured disc in her spinal column, that caused her severe pain in her lower back and upper thigh. This became much worse when she fell on ice one winter, displacing a disc in her spine and leaving her immobile for some months. Through the intervention of medical professionals in Bucharest, she was able to get back on her feet; however, the pain resurfaced from time to time.

Victoria's life in the countryside ended when an apartment became available for her family in Galați in the 1980s. She was eager to find a job because she said she was aware of the security provided by a pension.<sup>3</sup> Yet her husband was opposed to the idea, saying he preferred that she stay at home to look after the children and because of her health. Consequently, she never worked for wages outside the home, which she regretted. Still, when I asked how she felt about leaving the village, she said she did not miss it at all because living there had exacted too much from her.

Much can be learned from these vignettes of the lives of two Romanian, working-class women who lived through the communist regime. We discover the effort and time expended on work in a range of activities: household reproduction for both of them, Raluca adding industrial labor and Victoria work on a cooperative farm. More than the amount and intensity of work is revealed, however. The fragments also expose the ideologies that shaped the work lives of working-class women under communism. A central one was that women were responsible for parenting and carrying out domestic tasks, both of which they had to perform well if they wanted to avoid opprobrium cascading down on them. We see this in Raluca's apprehension about being "condemned" for producing vagrants and in Victoria's desire to shun the characterization of "good-for-nothing." This ethnographic evidence is a reminder of the power of widely held ideas to propagate gender inequality in spite of the advancement of an emergent, alternative ideology of women's emancipation from traditional roles and adopt a new position within the political economy of communism. In the end, it becomes clear that uprooting long-standing beliefs about

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<sup>3</sup> It is hard to know with certainty how aware she was at the time of the value of having a pension or whether her awareness emerged after the revolution, when she experienced the hardship of living without a pension.

women's and men's places within society and sowing new ones faced certain resistance during the communist years even if they were not completely unshakeable.

### **Gender and Post-communism**

The gendered distribution of labor under communism had more than the immediate implications exemplified in the lives of Raluca and Victoria. It also had very longstanding ones that even today, greater than a quarter century since the end of communist rule, are daily felt. As already underscored, the feminization of poverty among working-class retirees is one that I have repeatedly witnessed in Galați during anthropological research in the city from 2004 to 2015. This observation corresponds with those documented in the post-communist period by various scholars of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (e.g., Funk 1993, Kligman 1994, Fodor 2002, Fodor et al. 2002, Kideckel 2008:204-207) although it requires some qualification due to the fact that the post-communist period has by no means been uniform. Phases of relative economic growth, as in the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Romania, and periods of economic dissolution, as during the global financial meltdown beginning in 2008, have had ramifications on working-class pensioners. For example, austerity measures, such as an increase in the value-added tax from 19 to 24%, that were put in place following the onset of the 2008 "crisis," as it came to be widely known, in order to raise revenue to pay off foreign creditors, had a negative impact especially on the most vulnerable, who could not easily evade their reach. At the same time, some have altogether been shielded to at least a degree from such economic headwinds by having kin living abroad who send them remittances. Still, that the post-communist period has generally been a rout for working-class pensioners in Romania, particularly women, is glaringly manifest in many respects.

I gained one of my first insights into this on a frigid January morning in 2004. Arriving at a local foundation serving the elderly that had agreed to assist me in conducting research on retirees in the city, I discovered that the staff were preparing to distribute packets of food. Each contained one kilogram of cornmeal, sugar and wheat bran and a liter of sunflower oil, staples that were valued enough to have already attracted several people to the foundation even before the distribution had begun. The packets were offered free-of-charge each month only to retirees who

had a household income of less than two million lei (approximately \$60) per month<sup>4</sup> and, although the contents of the packets changed somewhat month to month, they were typically of similar proportions. Given the income limit, the majority of people standing in line were women, who, when it came their turn, presented pension stubs that showed the amount and type of retirement income they earned in order to qualify for a packet. Even if not completely accurate sums of recipients' household incomes – some, e.g., possibly engaging in informal work that brought more income or had family who supported them – the observation provided a distressing glimpse into retirees' social and economic circumstances. The distribution went on for hours, and, despite the very cold weather and the risk of falling because sidewalks had not been adequately cleared following a snowstorm (reports of elderly people falling on ice and breaking bones appearing in the news that day), many dozens of people came by to pick up a packet, and in the ensuing days the staff dedicated considerable time to distributing them to people who were immobile.

This was only the beginning of my education into the gendered composition of food insecurity among retirees in the post-communist era. Subsequently, I regularly saw older people, mostly women, in or near marketplaces hoping for handouts of food or money. To be sure, it was not always evident that begging was the purpose behind someone's sitting in or near a marketplace, but at times it was clear that assistance of some sort was being sought because the person sat with her palm turned upward and icons lying next to her. Still, a woman doing this in a market by no means confirmed that she was bereft of kin, friends or neighbors who also offered support. Be that as it may, desperation in all likelihood drove at least some elderly women and men into the streets to beg. Some of my observations strongly suggested this, including that of a blind, elderly woman who sat outside a grocery store awaiting handouts and that of an elderly woman who tremored quite uncontrollably while crouching near a busy intersection. The latter of these encounters was particularly disturbing because of its seeming duration: not only did I see the woman in the spot in 2011 but also in 2015.

Yet the most credible exposure I had to food insecurity came during visits to people's homes and in the time in which I lived with Victoria and her husband, Mihai. Elena, a woman whose husband had passed away and who was trying to make ends meet on a survivor's pension,

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<sup>4</sup> This was prior to the 2005 revaluation of the currency that involved removing the last four zeroes on all banknotes although it is worth noting that even up to my most recent visit to Galați in 2015 many people still spoke of prices using figures from before the revaluation.

took me to the refrigerator in her studio apartment where she lived alone during a visit I made in 2004, telling me “the wind is blowing” in it, meaning that it was nearly empty. Inside were a few eggs, a half-filled pot of soup and some bags of chicken. Although this did not in fact mean that it was entirely empty and Elena kept dry staples and canned goods on nearby shelves, the manner in which she talked about food – including that thoughts of it preoccupied her and that she could not afford even a glass of milk, much less a liter – told me that food scarcity was a relentless concern of hers. I also observed the extent of food scarcity at a celebration in 2004 in recognition of International Women’s Day at the foundation where my research had begun. In addition to reserving the day center for socializing and dancing, the staff presented food and beverages at no cost to the women in attendance. When the offerings were laid out on a table, attendants eagerly rushed to partake in them, a response which was so vigorous that one woman muttered to me that “they had not had seven years at home,” meaning they had not been taught as children how to properly behave in public. The woman who said this earned a higher pension than the other women, however, which may have led her to not appreciate the precarity of their lives.

My repeated stays of several weeks at a time with Victoria and Mihai during summer visits to Galați further solidified my belief that food scarcity was a legitimate concern among the working-class elderly. In this case, too, it was gendered since it was only Mihai who earned an income, Victoria somehow never qualifying for even a small pension from her years of labor in cooperative farming. This stranded them with but one pension even if my stays meant extra income for various necessities on a temporary basis. As a result, they engaged in numerous strategies in order to reduce spending on staples, two of the most remarkable being Mihai’s fishing and gleaning. His fishing involved leaving the apartment before dawn to spend the day at local waters. He mostly caught small fish but occasionally had the fortune of luring large ones, all of which he brought home, where he would scrap off the scales before packing them in plastic bags and storing them in the freezer. His gleaning occurred in the autumn when it was permissible for him to go onto fields after the harvest to gather what had been left behind. The outcome was prodigious, Mihai returning on his well-worn bicycle with bags of carrots, potatoes, onions, parsnips, corn and other produce that they consumed over the long winter. The work came with costs, however, Mihai complaining about knee pain and a sore back from all the time spent standing, kneeling and lifting, as well as riding his bicycle. Yet he persevered at an impressive clip, so much so that he often nodded off during mealtime conversations after long days outdoors.

Fishing and gleaning were distinctly male pursuits, poor elderly women more often engaging in other strategies in order to ease food scarcity. One that I observed and about which I have written elsewhere (Weber 2015a) was gathering handouts of food and drink at local cemeteries and churches. This practice takes place as part of a ritual of “giving *pomană*” to which members of the Romanian Orthodox church, who constitute the majority of people in Romania, adhere. It involves taking food and drink to cemeteries and churches in order to have them blessed and to distribute them to anyone present in honor of a family member or friend who has died (although giving *pomană* can also occur in people’s homes). *Pomană* is available year-round, but cemeteries and churches are especially active with its distribution on weekends, holidays and name days, making it particularly profitable for people to participate in such celebrations on those occasions. Although I witnessed young and old people, as well as men and women, taking advantage of *pomană*, more often than not it was poor, elderly women who sought it.

Gendered poverty has also been visible in the challenges older people face in getting their medical needs met. Retired, working-class women have borne the brunt of disinvestment in health care services since the end of communism that has crippled the public health system in Romania and other countries in the region (Garrett 2000, Holt 2010, 2016). It is often impossible for retired, working-class women – especially those who never worked outside the home for wages – to meet expectations that they pay, in money or in kind (but especially the former, as I explain in a moment), for health care services, a practice about which I and others have written (Stan 2012, Weber 2015b). And it is also often not possible for them to purchase prescribed pharmaceutical drugs and needed medical supplies.

Accounts tinged with gender inequity, if not outright shrouded in it, have been told to me by retirees, including up to my most recent visit to Galați in 2015. During that summer, Victoria, the woman who had lived in the countryside until the 1980s, was suffering from undiagnosed abdominal discomfort. She had experienced the tenderness for some time before my visit but had not been able to afford more than consultations and antibiotics, neither of which had given her much relief. Believing that she needed an MRI, she saved and borrowed money from family for the test. This led to a hospital stay and treatment with medication, but by the time I departed that summer she was still dissatisfied, turning to the church to soothe her persistent soreness through prayer and contemplation. Gender inequality was not pronounced in this case – I have heard similar stories of retired men grappling to get their health problems addressed – yet, the hampered public

health care system is today overall more responsive to those who have money, and that is men more often than women. And it should be highlighted that the prospect of receiving cash, rather than a material good (which was more commonly offered under communism in exchange for treatment or a consultation), potentially exacerbates the gendering of the distribution of health care services. A cash request, unlike one of a material good, is not limited by its physical dimensions and therefore can experience unfettered growth with relative ease.

A clear-cut instance of gender imbalance when it comes to managing health care needs occurred within another household of two working-class retirees, Sorina and Andu. Sorina lived with a chronic condition, which she treated with home remedies for a period in 2006. “I had to be content with tea,” she conceded, because she could not afford her prescribed medication given their limited income. Andu’s pension from a career as a plumber and assistance she received for her physical disability were going to pay for his health care needs. Indeed, they appeared more urgent – Andu passed away the following year – but the reliance on tea also revealed intrahousehold gender inequality in the distribution of resources for managing medical problems.

The cost of utilities has also cut into the limited budgets of working-class retirees in the post-communist era. Many have plunged deeper into poverty because of the expense of hot and cold water, electricity, natural gas and building maintenance. Victoria and Mihai, the retired couple with whom I stayed, have spent years in debt for these essentials, Victoria in particular being distressed by the possibility they would lose their home due to their entrenched insolvency. This was arguably an overstated concern given that they owned the apartment, but it nevertheless seemed real to Victoria probably because the prospect fit into the broader uncertainty the post-communist period had introduced into their lives. But even without tossing retirees out of their homes, the city could make life quite unpleasant for older women and men who could not pay their utility bills by severing or reducing people’s access to such services. At times, as in 2015, the discomfort was widely felt. For several months that year the supplier of heat to the municipal water system curtailed this service because so many people had arrears for hot water.

The challenge of paying for utilities did not weigh equally upon people, however. When I returned to Galați in 2015 after an absence of three years, I learned that it had become increasingly common for people to cut the heating of their household’s water from the municipal supplier and to install individual heating units in their apartments. This involved a substantial personal outlay, which only some could afford. While Victoria and Mihai lived with no hot water that summer and

no air conditioning in the stifling summer heat, another couple I know had both due partly to the sizeable pensions that the two earned. It was yet another example of the stratification that was becoming normative in post-communist Romania, but the peculiarities of its patterning – given elderly, working-class women’s overall lower incomes, the struggle to pay for utilities, as well as food and medical care, is greater among them than men – necessitate the staunch attention of political leaders and policymakers.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has briefly examined the communist and post-communist periods in Galați, Romania from a gendered perspective. Its central thesis is that gender inequality has pervaded both historical periods, a proposition that is widely supported by other scholars of the region. This fact is patent in the work women and men performed in their lifetimes, the expectation to carry out tasks both within the household and in industry and/or agriculture falling particularly heavily upon women, saddling them with the notorious double burden. Unique to this paper is, however, its focus on the lives of working-class women and men, a sector of the population of Romania and other countries of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that has not been given adequate attention by ethnographers working in the region despite the existence of some exceptions (e.g., Kideckel 2008). We learn from the paper the particular struggles faced by women of this social class background, but more research is needed on the challenges that they have endured under communism and in the post-communist era.

In spite of this present gap in scholarship, there is ample evidence that gender inequality among blue collar people has grown worse since 1989. This is due not only to the dramatic economic crises through which Romania passed in the 1990s and beginning in 2008 but also to the broader systemic changes that have occurred as the Romanian economy has undergone restructuring and privatization, a general examination of which can be found in Smith (2006) and in Edward Hugh’s blogposts. The instability this has created has affected women more than men in many respects, including in the impact it has had on state pensions. Already generally smaller than men’s retirement benefits because of bias that shaped the pension system during communism, the value of women’s pensions have diminished even further in the post-communist period for many reasons, including perhaps most notably a significant drop in contributions to the system

with the efflorescence of the informal market, also known as *la negru*, and as a result of labor migration. The aging of the population has made matters worse, leading to greater numbers of retirees leaning on the state at a time when revenue to support them is lacking. The persistent problem of corruption has further aggravated the problem given that it has resulted in funds needed for the public sector being pilfered.

Yet wider lessons can also be taken from the paper, including its illustration of the tenacity of gender stratification in state societies. The paper supports the idea that gender inequality is ubiquitous globally and will be eliminated only through the acknowledgement of this fact and the generation of policy that is sensitive to the problem. Further ethnographic research within contemporary societies has the potential to help this endeavor by shining a light on ordinary people's privation as they work to build comfortable lives for themselves and their families in a very uncertain world.

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