

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch

2013

Steering committee

Anriette Esterhuysen (APC)
Loe Schout (Hivos)

Coordinating committee

Janine Moolman (APC)
Monique Doppert (Hivos)
Valeria Betancourt (APC)
Mallory Knodel (APC)

Project coordinator

Valeria Betancourt

Editor

Alan Finlay

Assistant editor

Lori Nordstrom

Publication production

Mallory Knodel

Proofreading

Valerie Dee
Lori Nordstrom

Graphic design

Monocromo
info@monocromo.com.uy
Phone: +598 2400 1685

Cover illustration

Matías Bervejillo

Financial support provided by

Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands Funding Leadership and Opportunities for Women (FLOW)



Global Information Society Watch

Published by APC and Hivos

2013

Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Licence
<creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>
Some rights reserved.

ISSN: 2225-4625
ISBN: 978-92-95102-06-4
APC-201310-CIPP-R-EN-DIGITAL-197

ROMANIA

Gender and ICTs: An untold story



StrawberryNet Foundation and Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania

Rozália Klára Bakó

www.sbnet.ro and www.sapientia.ro/en

Introduction

“Give a woman a CD-ROM and she will use it as a mirror”: this offensive statement epitomises Romanian media discourses on women in general, and in relation to technology in particular.¹ Either as elitist contempt or sexist humour, gender stereotyping is omnipresent in the Romanian public space. Critical reflection on gender equality remains hidden in the ivory tower of academic discourses and the backstage of civil society initiatives. Mihaela Miroiu, a prominent Romanian feminist scholar, explains: “While men are portrayed on the first pages of media outlets, women are only on the last pages; while men sell head – competence and performance, women sell full body – sexual services, and hands – care services. The best way for a woman to be uninteresting in the Romanian mediascape is to be either a professional, or a student.”²

At the same time, a new tone in the public discourse is conveyed by businesses targeted at urban professional women: glossy magazines and cosmetic companies’ websites portray successful, connected female entrepreneurs. However, even the new wave of media discourse is loaded with gender stereotypes: “digital divas”³ must be young and attractive.

This report focuses on the ways in which online media from Romania portrays women in relation to information and communications technologies (ICTs).

Policy and political background: “Room-service feminism”

In a strongly worded article on the status of Romanian women, Miroiu⁴ argues that in post-socialist

countries a new patriarchy has developed, a “political apartheid” excluding women from key public positions. Meanwhile, European Union (EU) accession has imposed formal, convenience, top-down gender equality policies called “room-service feminism” by the author.⁵

A shadow report submitted in 2000 by 17 Romanian women and human rights NGOs to the United Nation’s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) stated that gender equality issues are marginalised in Romania after the fall of Communism. Poor resource allocation and a lack of interest amongst opinion leaders has resulted in a “serious deficit in defining and approaching the situation of women, and in identifying the causes and formulating the strategies and policies for the improvement of this situation.”⁶

The Communist regime in Romania collapsed in 1990, but it took 12 years to regulate sexual harassment in the country (Law 202/2002). Although the legislative framework improved significantly⁷ during Romania’s accession to the EU from 2000 to 2006, gender mainstreaming remained a low priority on the public agenda. Women’s issues “popped up” mainly when high profile personalities were involved.

On 18 June 2013 a media scandal emerged when Romanian President Traian Basescu declared at a meeting with businesswomen, suggesting that they should return to their traditional roles as mothers: “How on earth can Roma women raise five, six children, while Romanian women cannot?”⁸ As a result, several NGOs have publicly protested and 12 women together with human rights organisations submitted a petition to the Romanian Council for Combatting Discrimination.⁹ The petition expressed concerns related to discriminating against women in general, Roma women in particular, and to perpetuating gender stereotypes.

1 www.thesexist.ro/femeite-si-tehnologia-386.html

2 Miroiu, M. (2005) Sex si maini si cap si muschi, *Revista* 22. www.revista22.ro/sex-si-maini-cap-si-muschi-1594.html

3 www.digitaldivas.ro/2013

4 Miroiu, M. (2004) State men, market women: The effects of left conservatism on gender politics in Romanian transition, *Feminismo/s*, 3, p. 207-234. rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/3243/1/Feminismos_3_14.pdf

5 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

6 www.legislationline.org/documents/id/7703

7 As shown in the Romanian CEDAW report submitted in 2006: www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/35sess.htm

8 www.wall-street.ro/articol/Social/150548/mai-multe-ong-uri-cer-sanctionarea-lui-basescu-pentru-declaratii-discriminatorii-despre-femei.html

9 On 3 July 2013 the Romanian Council for Combatting Discrimination ruled that no discrimination had been committed.

One of the protesting organisations represented Roma women via its Facebook campaigning platform called eRomnja.¹⁰ Roma women are among the most disadvantaged social groups in Romania, with the highest rate of illiteracy and unemployment, and the lowest level of ICT use.¹¹ A survey conducted in 2011 found that only 19% of Roma households owned a desktop or a laptop computer,¹² compared to the 52.9% country average.¹³ Very few visible projects have tackled the issue of Roma women and ICTs, and those that have been implemented have met with mixed success. For example, an EU-funded initiative aimed at improving access for Roma women to the labour market (2009-2011) succeeded in training only 11 Roma women from two Romanian counties in using computers.¹⁴

Measuring access to ICTs in a gender-sensitive way using gender indicators is a key issue for the developmental agenda, but gender-aggregated information on a macro level is scarce. Gender and ICT statistics are collected inconsistently across countries and regions.¹⁵ For the gender gap index, the World Economic Forum has developed a composite measurement called the Global Gender Gap Index or GGGI: Romania ranked 67th out of 135 countries in 2012, with better scores for economic participation, education levels and health, but lagging far behind other countries in the field of political empowerment.¹⁶

From gender equality to digital inclusion?

At the lower end of the digital opportunities spectrum in Romania stand elderly Roma women, most of them living in rural areas; the higher end is represented by young, urban, connected businesswomen – the “digital divas”.

A project website called “Digital Divas” features, at its very centre, a man:¹⁷ no matter how successful one is as a woman, there must be a guardian, a male key figure offering a warranty of quality, reliability and validity of the discourse.

But how connected are digital divas?

The gender gap and the digital divide: Romania in the European context

A comparative analysis of 31 European countries using a gender and ICT indicator system called GIC-TIS, conducted by Spanish researchers in 2011, has resulted in a ranking that combines gender equality and digital inclusion.¹⁸ The authors explain that gender equality has moved forward in recent years, but further research is needed to find out whether the gender gap coincides with the digital divide.

European countries were grouped into five categories:

- High e-inclusion and high e-equality: Iceland, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and to a lesser extent France, Slovenia and the Netherlands.
- High e-inclusion and low e-equality: Luxembourg, Germany and the United Kingdom.
- Medium e-inclusion and e-equality: Hungary, Malta, Portugal and Slovakia.
- Low e-inclusion and high e-equality: Romania, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and to a lesser extent, Poland and Belgium.
- Low e-inclusion and low e-equality: Greece, Cyprus, Macedonia, Croatia, and to a lesser extent, Italy, Ireland and Spain.¹⁹

Romania ranked 13th out of 31 on the e-equality scale – measuring gender differences in access to ICTs – but last on the e-inclusion scale, which assesses the level of ICT use in general.

Another study aimed at comparing EU countries in terms of gender equality and digital inclusion has found significant improvements in women’s access to ICTs across Europe from 2009 to 2011, but Romania ranked the lowest among the 27 countries assessed.²⁰ Overall, ICT use in Romania lags behind other EU member states, but there are significant differences between the young and the elderly, the urban and the rural, the educated and the less educated people in the country. The typical Romanian non-ICT user lives in a rural area, is older than 55, has not completed high school, and is more likely to be a woman. The broadband penetration rate measured

10 www.facebook.com/pages/E-Romnja/488288607894622

11 Nagy, E. (2010) Esetbemutató: egy roma család számítógép- és internet-használati szokásai, *Reconnect*, 2(2), p. 138-141.

12 www.feminism-romania.ro/publicatii/rapoarte/672-studiu-sociologic-privind-situatia-femeilor-rome-din-romania.html

13 International Telecommunication Union (2012) *Measuring the Information Society*, p. 209.

14 www.fonduri-structurale.ro/detalii.aspx?eID=5445&t=Stiri

15 Hafkin, N. J. and Huyer, S. (2007) Women and Gender in ICT: Statistics and Indicators for Development, *Information Technologies and International Development*, 4(2), p. 27.

16 Hausmann R., Tyson, L. and Zahidi, S. (2012) *The Global Gender Gap Report 2012*, World Economic Forum, p. 9-10.

17 comunic.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/digital-divas-screenshot.png

18 Castano Collado, C., Fernández, J. M. and Martínez, J. L. (2011) The digital divide from a gender perspective in Spain and Europe: Measuring with composite indicators, *Reis*, 136, p. 127-140.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

20 Guerrieri, P. and Bentivegna, S. (2011) Digital Inequalities in Europe, in Guerrieri, P. and Bentivegna, S. (eds.) *The Economic Impact of Digital Technologies: Measuring Inclusion and Diffusion in Europe*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, p. 115.

for Romanian households was 45.2% for fixed and 37.4% for mobile connections in 2012, with significant differences between urban and rural areas.²¹

As suggested, the level of gender mainstreaming in assessing the digital divide is absent from public discourse in Romania. However, there is a growing interest in the business sector in the issue of women and ICTs: a niche market of women as gadget users is developing in the country.

The EU Kids Online Romanian report has raised concerns about the low level of e-literacy among parents, leading to children's vulnerability online. Growing numbers of girls as victims, and – unexpectedly – as e-bullying offenders,²² have shown that education has a long way to go for the new wave of “digital immigrants”.²³

Women and technology in Romanian online discourses

Access for Romanian women to the public sphere is limited: Romina Surugiu, a media expert, argues that they are more bystanders than active participants. Because of this, political parties do not include women's problems on their agendas. The media tend to follow the public agenda set by political leaders, ignoring most of the topics important to women's lives.²⁴

A simple web search with the keywords “women” and “information technology” in the Romanian language shows a wide range of business, media and NGO initiatives tackling the issue of gender and ICTs. Businesses are the key drivers of economic development and innovation in Romania, and therefore it is not surprising that women and technology issues are promoted mainly by the media and ICT companies.

In 2012, *MarketWatch* magazine initiated the “Women in Technology” awards. Five awards have been established for Romanian women: “Successful career in ICTs”, with a business and a technical track; “Promoting organisational diversity”; “The best initiative in sustaining women in ICTs”; and “Women entrepreneurship in ICTs”.²⁵ The award winners were women managers from branches of

multinational companies set up in Romania, and from an organisation founded in 2012 called Girls in Tech Romania, a branch of an international network established in San Francisco in 2007.²⁶

An NGO – Institute for Sustainable Development – has featured as topic of the month “Women and Technology”, highlighting the role women managers play in international corporations in general, and in ICT businesses in particular. High-profile CEOs like Virginia Rometty (IBM), Marissa Mayer (Yahoo), or Meg Whitman (HP) are set as role models for Romanian businesswomen.²⁷

Glossy women's magazines encourage readers to use gadgets customised for women,²⁸ while others promote young and successful women in technology,²⁹ highlighting those who are “sexy and bright”.³⁰ Technology and attractive women sell – at least according to the mindset of a patriarchal society, even if disguised in “room-service feminist” discourses.³¹

The “E-lady” online discussion forum has a more pragmatic approach, and an educational purpose: to share ICT information among women. Topics vary from general computer use issues to blogging, phishing and internet safety.³²

Two academic initiatives worth mentioning in changing the tone of the mainstream discourse on women and ICTs are the DigiTales project and the Catalogue of Ads Offending Women. Both have been coordinated by universities, but targeted at civil society actors at large; these are presented in the next section of this report.

Empowering women through ICTs: Good practices

The DigiTales project, initiated in 2012 and coordinated by Goldsmiths, University of London, involved civil society organisations from Romania, Slovenia and Finland, and was aimed at extending the creative practices of elderly people through digital storytelling.³³ In Romania, 14 librarians from 12

21 Autoritatea Nationala pentru Administrare si Reglementare in Comunicatii (2013) *Piata serviciilor de comunicatii electronice din Romania. Raport de date statistice pentru perioada 1 iulie – 31 decembrie 2012*, p. 41.

22 Outnumbering boys.

23 Velicu, A. (2013) Violence on the internet: Victims versus bullies, paper presented at the New Media Conference, Targu Mures, Romania, 12-13 April.

24 Surugiu, R. (2012) “Glossy” politicians: Portraying women politicians in Romanian consumer magazines, in *Challenges of the Knowledge Society: Conference Proceedings*, Pro Universitaria, Bucharest, p. 1930.

25 www.computerblog.ro/dan/romania/premiile-femei-tehnologie.html

26 gitromania.com/about

27 www.imdd.ro/media/subiectul-lunii/femei-tehnologie-547

28 www.unica.ro/detalii-articole/articole/it-gadgeturi-aplicatii-mobile-smartphone-special-femei-32570.html

29 gadgetrends.ro/2013/04/29/cele-mai-importante-30-de-femei-sub-30-de-ani-din-tehnologie

30 www.yoda.ro/hardware/sunt-sexy-si-geniale-13-femei-fatale-care-au-cucerit-lumea-sutelor-de-miliarde-de-dolari-din-tehnologie.html

31 incomemagazine.ro/articles/tehnologie-performanta-si-femei-frumoase-intr-un-spatiu-deposit

32 www.elady.ro/forums/index.php?act=SF&s=&f=44

33 Rooke, A. and Slater, I. (2012) *Extending Creative Practice. Final Evaluation Report*, Goldsmiths, University of London, p. 11-13. www.gold.ac.uk/media/Extending%20Creative%20Practice%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf

county libraries have been trained to teach digital storytelling. As a result, 105 elderly people have learned to use a computer, most of them women. The tangible output was a series of 99 “DigiTales” created by trainees, and facilitated by trainers.³⁴

Another empowering project was the online campaign organised by the feminist centre Filia, from the National School of Political Science and Public Administration, Bucharest: “Say No to Offensive Advertising”.³⁵ In 2012 the group published a catalogue of ads considered offensive towards women; the booklet is available online.³⁶

No doubt there are many more civil society initiatives in Romania aimed at empowering women in general, and in relation to ICTs in particular. However, these projects and actions are not vocal enough and do not reach large audiences.

Conclusions

Romania’s level of access to ICTs is improving rapidly, but it is still lagging behind other European countries. The typical digitally excluded person in the country is older than 55, lives in a rural area, has not completed high school, and is more likely to be a woman.

As the 2000 CEDAW report put it, “Media is not gender-sensitive; therefore it has no contribution to the definition of the general problems of women in Romanian contemporary society or to the formulation of possible measures and actions for improving their status.”³⁷ Women and ICTs are still an untold story.

Online media discourses in Romania are loaded with gender stereotypes, even when hidden between glossy covers for urban, connected digital divas. Behind “room-service feminism” rests a patriarchal society, but ICTs offer spaces and tools for change.

Action steps

According to the Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM) principles³⁸ developed by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), participatory critical reflection and a methodologically sound, context- and gender-sensitive approach to women and ICTs are necessary.

In Romania, projects like DigiTales and Say No to Offensive Advertising should be promoted more broadly and replicated in order to empower women through ICTs.

Civil society organisations should stand up more often and more consistently against gender stereotyping and discrimination against women, with a special regard to vulnerable groups like Roma women.

Local, national and international projects on gender and ICTs should connect through the platforms and tools of the interactive web. New media can carry a new, inclusive discourse: bridges are there. ■

34 www.progressfoundation.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=95&Itemid=227

35 nupublicitatiiofensatoare.blogspot.ro

36 www.scribd.com/doc/134511271/Catalogul-reclamelor-ofensatoare

37 www.legislationline.org/documents/id/7703

38 www.genderevaluation.net/sites/default/files/sites/dev.genderevaluation.net/files/GEMEnglish_o.pdf, p. 23.