

Albanian Women after Socialism and the Balkan War

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The fall of Communism and the consequences over gender relations

Transformations of gender relations are taking place all over the world, also due to recent structural changes in the “world order”: from the collapse of communist regimes to the arising of religious fundamentalisms. Yet these changes are more visible in countries in transition and in development (UNICEF 1999; UNDP 2000; UN 2000). Historical and political backgrounds are very different in post-socialist and post-colonial countries, both in relation to previous forms of government and to gender policies.

The clash of communist regimes in Europe has had several consequences at the both macro- and micro- level. The political sphere, controlled by a unique party stopped having the control, over all socio-economic activities and civil society gave way to a mainly uncontrolled market economy. This has created new forms of disparity among the population. In particular, gender relations have changed in the public and private domains and not always for the better. In many cases women have been constrained to accept “neo-traditional” and “neo-patriarchal” forms of subjection to men both in the workplace and in the family.

This trend contradicts previous policies of the socialist state, which were aimed at promoting - at least formally – the presence of women in politics as well as at work. Socialist states had in fact developed policies of quotas for political representation and a system of full employment for women in the labour market, on the basis of the formal equality among the sexes. Women had to work also to contribute to construct the welfare and the well-being of socialism. Women who did not work were socially stigmatised.

The lack of social protection / political provisions addressed to vulnerable groups / individuals, next to the uncontrolled power of the free market, has produced an increasing gap not only among classes and genders. The proletariat as a unique social class does not exist any more and gender disparities at all level of the social hierarchy have extended. Women are becoming more and more excluded from the labour market because of both economic and cultural reasons, ranging from the increasing unemployment to the rebirth of traditional patriarchal mentality. Women are often forced to assume traditional roles in the household in a cross-class way, independently of whether the husband is a worker or a manager.

Yet, beside the appearances of a “macho” power, where men control economic and political sectors and decision-making roles, post-communist masculinity is in a state of crisis. Men are disoriented and the answer to their work frustrations and post-war traumas is often domestic violence (Calloni, 2000 a), self-destruction through alcohol, illegal business and trafficking in human beings.

Indeed, trafficking in women and girls has increased in the last years and gender violence is growing exponentially on breaking traditional taboos (Miria, 1999). That means that gender issues are becoming more and more central in post-socialist countries, but so are forums of resistance. This explains also the increase of specific organisations of civil society in Eastern-Central European countries. In the majority of cases, NGO's have constituted their

programmes, praxis and interventions in social issues in the form of self-help against the worsening of present socio-economic conditions. Therefore, the demands for the establishment of crisis centres, research organisations and gender institutes are exponentially growing in post-socialist countries.

The urge for such resistance comes from bottom up, mostly from women, who in many cases lived personally through violence and discrimination. These individual experiences together with the changes at the macro-level induce women's group not only to create autonomous centres, but also to establish new forms of international co-operation, mostly with Western feminist activists and scholars, as is happened in the Russian Barents Region (Saarinen, 1999-2002). This new consciousness of the possible political power of women's associations introduces new perspectives both in civil society and in the government. These kinds of cross-borders collaboration in countries in transition allow women to operationalise new and innovative models of sustainable development, giving visibility to the long-neglected private and public problems of women. In this way, the meaning and the effects of "globalisation" can be reframed from a gender perspective (Calloni & Saarinen, 2001), breaking the North-South and West-East divides.

On the basis of the requests of Eastern-Central European NGO's, feminist activists and researchers from both Northern and Southern European countries, have created new programs of co-operation both at the institutional and grassroots level. In some way they have initiated a "third wave" of feminism in a cross-cultural way. New forms of co-operation between European and post-socialist feminists / scholars have thus become crucial for the democratisation of the European frontier regions. As Saarinen put it: "By the advent of the 21st Century, a new type of double strategy for women's movements has been developed. This strategy has formed a basis of something we can call the 'third wave' of women's movements. It is trans-national by its origin and nature and it is able to mobilise women in masses also in the Third World and in the post-socialist states. We are claiming that we have to combine women's trans-national and trans-regional informal mobilisation and activism from below and the sphere of participatory democracy, with the formal pressure from above, from the sphere of intergovernmental and -parliamentarian democracy. This process is of special importance for women excluded from national political decision-making in areas of a turbulent transition or under undemocratic political orders. It is crucial for attributing to women chances of influence on trans-regional, regional and global levels." (Saarinen, 2000).

The decline of the Soviet Union as a compact political confederation has showed enormous economic, social, cultural and religious variations among the different regions, which were still present before the end of communism. However, this process has not only characterised the new autonomous, former Soviet republics, but also the countries, which were part of the former Soviet Confederation. Yet these republics have reacted in different ways to the fall of communism through different forms of economic development and social policies. As a result, we can see now a sort of hierarchy among post-socialist countries, mostly which bears on their potential for admission to the European Union, through to the enlargement to East of a number of the member states.

Among these, Albania scores one of the lowest places in the classification due to its socio-economic conditions. Part of this is also due to the fact that Albania, governed by Enver Hoxa until his death in 1985, has long been a very isolated and poor country. Here, people did not have the possibility to move, as the citizens of other socialist republics did, within the borders of the allied socialist countries. Albania was the most segregated and "archaic" communist country. Under communism Albania remained thus a strong patriarchal society in the private sphere as well as in the political hierarchy (Becker, 1983).

On the basis of these considerations, I would like to give some information about: 1) the controversial process of democratisation in Albania, also in relation to the recent Balkan war and Kosovo issue; 2) the present condition of women and the differentiation between rural and urban areas in Albania; 3) new forms of co-operation between EU feminist scholars/activists and local women, mentioning my experience as a project manager for the establishment of a Gender institute at the University of Tirana.

Albania: Mediterranean history and segregation of women

The present condition of Albanian women cannot be adequately understood, without mentioning the complex historical background.

Albanian people have an Illyrian-Pelasgian origin, as indicated by the Albanian tongue, which is different from the languages used by the neighbouring populations. Illyrians were a composition of many tribes, settled in the Balkan area, who were conquered by the Roman Empire in the first century AD. Albania became later an autonomous kingship under the Byzantine Empire, but after having experienced many other dominations. In the 15th century Albania became part of the Ottoman Empire.

In 1912, after many years of struggles against the Turkish power, Austria-Hungary and Italy agreed about the creation of an independent state of Albania. Yet, although the region of Kosovo was composed by a majority of Albanian Islamic population, it was attributed to Serbia, while a region in the South, composed by Greek Orthodox communities, was included within the Albanian borders. In 1939 the Italian fascist regime conquered Albania as a colony, a part of its expansionistic strategies in the Balkans. In these years an increasing differentiation among the Northern (Whitaker) and the South part of Albania became more visible: the North was still strongly influenced by tribal and feudal traditions (like the Kanun), while the South was more involved in process of modernisation.

After World War II, in 1946 Enver Hoxa became the leader of the Socialist Republic of Albania, starting a process of nationalisation and modernisation of previous institutions. Albanian nationalism should be conceived, therefore, in political terms; that is as the struggle against foreign dominations more than as a struggle for affirming a religious faith. Problems about cultural minorities have increased after Communism (Schwandner-Sievers, 1999).

A process of democratisation started in Albania only in 1990, after the fall of the Berlin wall, when independent political parties were created and the freedom to travel for citizens was granted. In 1992, Sali Berisha, leader of the Democratic Party, won the national election. Economic and political instability increased in 1997 with the explosion of civil disorders. The war in Kosovo in 1999, led by the Serbians opened a new phase in Albania because of the refugees, who escaped from persecution and massacres, creating a humanitarian emergency.

At the end of the Balkan war in 1999 a new phase of peace began. In 2000 national elections were announced and the party connected to the former socialist party was the winner against the Berisha's coalition. A new wave of political and economic stability is now characterising Albanian society, thanks to a strong international financial support (among others of the World Bank, 1999) at the governmental as well at civil society's level.

This brief reconstruction of Albanian history aims at stressing the anthropological and political specificity of the Albanian population, who is culturally different from neighbouring populations, who are Slavs, Latins and Greeks. These features have characterised also gender relations, as indicated by the traditionally marginal position occupied by women in society. Indeed, women have been over centuries subjected to very strong community regulations, which derive from the combination of tribal rituals and feudal constraints under the Islamic religion. Women were relegated to the home or to remote rural areas. They did not have any status. Therefore, we have to be aware that the history of Albanian women (Pritchett Post,

1999) differs strongly from the history of their neighbours. This historical background explains also why former-socialist countries show such different patterns of socio-political and economic development.

During communism there was an attempt at the modernisation of Albanian society and of women's conditions. It initiated with the dictatorship of Enver Hoxa, who introduced legal equality for women and the formal possibility to become active in all sectors of work and society. This simply meant that, even though during Communism women were induced to participate in public life, nevertheless strong traditional impositions regulated daily life. Communism helped women in terms of economic occupation and political representation, but not in terms of symmetrical gender relations.

This aspect became very evident shortly after the fall of communism, when women lost formal protections and new laws were not yet promoted by a democratic parliament. This split between norms and reality still exists, beside the approval of a democratic constitution in 1998 and the ratification of international norms, like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Women's human rights are not yet fully respected (Corbanese, 2000) and in many cases the feudal law of the Kanun (Donert 1999) is still practised mainly in Northern Albania.

Albania: the combination of pre- and post-modern forms of gender relations

Women's rights are recognised by the Albanian Constitution under article no. 3 on "integrity of human dignity, human rights and freedoms" and article no. 18, which affirms that "No one may be discriminated for reasons such as gender, race, religion, ethnicity, language, political, religious or philosophical beliefs, economic condition, education or social position or because of who his parents are." (Republic of Albania, 1998)

Yet beside formal declarations, the condition of women is not "equal" to men. In the Albanian National Women Report, the new nature of the gender gap is clearly stressed, together with the persistence of traditional forms of segregation:

"One of the main gender concerns in Albania today seems to be the missing link between de jure and de facto equality with regards to access to employment, business and credit institutions, health and social services. Albanian law prohibits gender discrimination and job segregation in public and private employment, but despite this prohibition and despite the high level of women education, also in traditional male-dominated areas, employment opportunities for women are still very few and badly remunerated. Furthermore, the intensive involvement of women in the labour force during the communist regime was not accompanied by changes in the division of labour in the family. (...) Paradoxically the emergence of a more democratic society and the growth of civil society have led not to greater participation in decision making but in greater exclusion from public life and women's political participation" (UNDP, 1999, 6-7).

This quotation stresses the complex process of democratisation in Albania, which contradicts the traditional theory of the development of a free public sphere, as in the political and economic beliefs of the Liberal State in Western countries. In the reconstruction of the origins of the public sphere in Europe and hence the birth of democratic governments, the process of emancipation of women is generally conceived as one of the most radical forms of public dissidence. It is a claim for a full inclusion in the domain of citizenship, which points out the limits of the nation-state.

However, countries that are in development and transition show instead an increasing split between a free economic development and the decreasing participation and representation in institutional politics, which multiplies class and gender gaps. In many cases, democratisation does not imply automatically economic prosperity for all. Nor does it guarantee the political

equity that is due also to the re-emergence of male-oriented mentalities. Moreover, if freedom of movement has partly transformed the previous historical attitudes of a static Albanian society, at the same time it has created an increase of illegal migration and trafficking in women as prostitutes. In sum, the emergence of a differentiated public opinion has not led to a fairer distribution of resources and political representation. This is precisely the case of women, who are experiencing new forms of marginalisation in the rural as well as in the urban areas.

However, in the last years, since then Albanian governments became more stable, new gender oriented laws and institutions have been introduced. As early as 1991, a law concerning the interruption of unwanted pregnancy was promoted and now women can freely perform abortions in public hospitals. In fact, Albania with Rumania was the only communist country, where abortion was legally prosecuted. Moreover, other rights have been recognised: divorce, laws against sexual harassment and for the right of inheritance. The implementation and use of these rights, however, is quite partial, because of the social hostility against changing traditional gender relations.

Even though the family is the “most stable” institution in Albania, many changes are visible, mostly in young generations and as a consequence of education opportunities (Dudwick & Shahriari, 2000). The consequences of individual “liberty” are multifaceted. On the one hand, women do not want to go back to the previous dictatorial government due to the socio-political limitations it had; on the other hand, they feel “unprotected” by the State, often disoriented and more and more dependent on their husbands because of the lack of job opportunities and the increasing discrimination in the work market. Divorces are thus also decreasing due to the impossibility for women to have money of their own and for children’s maintenance, even though divorce is not as socially stigmatised as it was before. Moreover, there is no strong and compact trade union force to organise collective negotiations, which can protect individual women workers and workers in general.

Despite the emergence of “neo-traditional” forms of gender discrimination in the post-communist Albanian society, social and individual mentality over gender issues has changed over time. This is due mostly to the impact of young generations, who can move around for the purpose of education, and are “connected to the world” through the new information means of mass communication.

Albanian NGOs and new approaches to international co-operation

One of the most visible effects of the “liberalisation” of economics and the democratisation of politics has been the exponential growth of non-governmental organisations. This dynamism is not only due to the liberty of association and the freedom of developing autonomous economic activities, independent from the State control. It is also a result of the financial help provided international organisations and foreign associations. The financial “intervention” of foreign associations was originally aimed at increasing the consistency of a highly differentiated civil society, by supporting different groups and projects. However, this approach was ambivalent in its consequences.

For instance, from the point of view of the interested Albanian individuals and NGOs, “the difficulties in fund-raising to cover fixed costs, may turn civil society’s movements into donor-oriented entities, not serving the real need of the country and of the most vulnerable groups.” (UNDP, 1999, 8). About 600 NGO’s have been registered in Albania (Albanian Civil Society Foundation, 2000), and some of them are composed by only a person. No law regulates these groups or gives any definition of their status.

This problem has characterised also Albanian women’s NGOs. The women’s movement in Albania is not at all compact, and many ideological differences and disagreement are visible

among women and feminists, from different political parties, diverse political orientations and from different women's cultures.

After the fall of communism, women (mostly writers, politicians and intellectuals) started in fact to discuss feminism and gender issues, starting from individual needs and rethinking their own life in the light of the "new society" (Çuli, 2000). They had to find a new existential and professional orientation. Therefore, they initiated to establish groups for public debate and social pressure, to open associations and developing gender oriented programs, like the association *Minerva*. Therefore, in 1991 activities of urban women started with humanitarian help (from food to medicine) to women in remote Albanian areas, supported by international programmes of co-operation.

However, with the increase of new forms of exploitation of women due to the transformed social situation and the arising of new "pathologies" (from domestic violence, to prostitution, drug abuse, social insecurity, and so on), the activities of women's NGOs changed in aims and structure. This new step of the Albanian women's movement was due to their "internationalisation". A formal delegation of Albanian women and representatives of NGOs participated in the 4th World Conference held in Beijing in 1995, where they had the possibility to meet other groups of women/ politicians and to initiate plans for further co-operation. Therefore, the Beijing conference had a strong impact on the institutionalisation of feminist groups in Albania and the presentation of the gender issue as a crucial point for the young Albanian democracy.

Yet a generational gap is now characterising Albanian NGOs: "young women are not present in the women's organisations or when they are present they are not the most active part of the movement. In the leading structures of women's NGOs young leader are missing, which is a gap slowing the access of women's NGOs to new ideas and decrease the involvement of young women in NGOs' activities." (UNDP, 1999, 39).

The problems at stake both in the Albanian society and in women's movements are thus several and complex. Yet, as mentioned above, the development of gender issues in Albania cannot be fully understood without the work done by women officers of international organisations and feminists NGOs, who have worked at different levels for improving the social conditions of the Albanian population and in particular of women.

In particular, the Italian Government has financed over years many kinds of projects, supported by the Ministry of Foreigner Affairs, Ministry of Social Affairs, The Ministry for Equal Opportunities, Commission for Equal Opportunities. The interest of Italy for Albania is due to several reasons. Despite the fact that Albania was an Italian "colony" during fascism, and thus suffered at the hand of the Italians, this country is geographically very close to Italy and in the last years the problems of illegal trafficking in human beings and drugs through the Mediterranean Sea have increased. Therefore, many programmes have been financed, mostly for encouraging a co-operation between Albanian and Italian women's NGOs, in a very innovative manner.

In particular, the Associazione per le donne albanesi (1997, 1998-1999) and the Association Orlando of Bologna – financed by the Italian Ministry of Social Affairs - have developed several projects in different parts of Albania, innovating both the content and the form of international co-operation. Social and economic activities were created in collaboration with Albanian women's centres and communities, stressing the importance of co-ordinating common tasks between local and foreign groups for the successful completion of joint projects. New aggregation forms among women were encouraged and shelters against violence and post-war traumas, caused during and after the Balkan strikes and in particular the Kosovo war, were opened. The results have shown the possibility to create forms of democracy and employment, starting from the needs of people that is from, to say, bottom up.

Besides the financing of Albanian and foreigner women's NGOs, international organisations and national governments have sustained initiatives at the institutional level. Among others, the United Nation Development Programme has sustained governmental projects in Albania. In particular, it has supported the constitution of the Women and Family Committee (1999), which was created in 1998 by the Council of Ministries within the structure of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Women. This Committee has the aim to develop gender-oriented institutions and policies, implementing the main issues stated in the Platform for Action (1996), signed in Beijing.

Within the framework of this new kind of international co-operation for projects devoted to women, I contributed to establish a Gender Institute at the University of Tirana, while I was directing the International Network for Research on Gender at the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics and Political Science in London.

I was project manager for developing a section of the project called Promotion of Social and Economic Status of Women in Albania. It was supported by the United Nations Development Program - Office for Project Services (UNDP/OPS), in collaboration with the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Soros Foundation in Tirana. The chief technical adviser of the project was Valli Corbanese (UNDP – Corbanese, 2000). The project initiated in January 2000 and was divided into different steps. It had to be fulfilled within two years. Documents had to be analysed, surveys and research materials; meetings with scholars, activists, NGO's, researchers, politicians and officers of both national and international organisations had to be organised; the Statute of the Gender Institute had to be drafted; bibliographical indications for the establishment of a specialised library on Women's Studies had to be set up; a training course for librarians and lecturers had to be created; and a Master programme was designed.

The Executing Agency of UNDP/OPS and the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Tirana (where the Gender Institute is based) approved the Statute in October 2000. A gender program on university curricula started to run in December 2000, funded by the Soros Foundation and co-ordinated by Silvana Miria. In March 2001 the Gender Studies Centre was inaugurated.

While I was working on this project, meeting people and studying documents, I had the impression that women can attribute to "globalisation" a different significance, starting from different modalities of co-operation and interaction about specific socio-political and cultural issues. Globalisation therefore does not have to do only with the financial market, but also with the expanding interconnection among human beings. Therefore, I thought that one of the most productive and innovative ways for approaching this issue consisted in reframing the notion of development and international co-operation from a gender perspective and from the pragmatic viewpoint of cross-borders research networks.

In particular, the Statute of the Gender Institute had to lay down the structure for the entire institution and to regulate the relationships between international donors and Albanian institutions. Therefore, I tried to put at work pragmatically normative ideas in factual contexts of daily life in countries in transition. I kept in mind the necessity to combine the normative notion of social justice with the possibility to operationalise a new model of sustainable development. Therefore, clear indications were given about the procedural steps which should be followed, to avoid arbitrary behaviours and personal favours, and to permit the advancement of women, mostly the most disadvantaged groups. In particular, I look at the sustainability of the Albanian Gender Institute, becoming autonomous from the donors over the years, producing its own resources. The "quality" of the Institute as an institution was also a top priority: it should permit permanently the achievement of professional qualifications at different levels, improving professional skills. That means that the Institute may provide Master

programmes, but also offer training courses for scholars, who will later teach MA courses in Gender Studies. In this spirit, special provisions were made to develop training seminars and courses for NGO's, in particular for civil servants (for instance, the reform of the family law requires now a new training for judges).

New qualifications and professional skills are required in the global restructuring of the political, institutional, social and economic system in Albania. The Gender Institute should thus play a crucial role of mediation, reconnecting in a legitimate way university, education and research with political institutions and civil society.

In my contribution to designing the Gender Institute in Tirana, I tried thus to attribute a pragmatical meaning to the following normative notions: a) functioning and development of human capabilities and empowerment; b) establishment and stabilisation of democratic institutions; c) connections between civil society and the State through centres of research and life long learning; d) implementation of programs for equal opportunities/ changes among citizens; e) contribution for increasing the social quality of daily life.

Now the implementation of this project should be followed step by step by the local women, checking its pragmatic / normative validity or its intrinsic limits.

On the basis of this experience, I can thus say that the improvement of cross-cultural collaboration and cross-borders research networks is one of the major tasks for feminist activists and scholars to improve social sciences and challenging and changing traditional notions of science and research (European Commission, 2000). But it is also one of the possibilities pointing to indicating concrete perspectives for the construction of forms of cosmopolitan democracy, starting from bottom up. "Globalisation" can be "different".

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