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**Contemporary Feminist Discourse,
an Interdisciplinary Approach**

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Abstract: Nowadays, feminist discourse requires an interdisciplinary approach, through the sociology or media studies. Comparing with other periods of time, the *new* feminists understood the inherent power of New Media and tend to use it as a tool, for making their message more popular. Is it effective? Is it a waste of time? Although, it is premature to draw conclusions, the social facts that are to be used in this research (news, specific blogs and sites, feedback on social networks) seem to tilt the balance towards a positive impact created by recent feminist discourse. The aim of this research is to draw the features of the communication established between feminist organizations, media institutions and media consumers, as it will be revealed during the three case studies proposed. The pattern can be designed as follows: feminist organizations launch a message; media institutions ignore it or transform it into a piece of news; readers or listeners reach the message, giving their immediate feedback on social networks, blogs and sites belonging to feminist organizations or media institutions. Feminist organizations are new comers in Romania, since the oldest of them being launched 10 years ago, comparing with European Women's Lobby, socially active for decades. Among the current Romanian feminist organizations Centrul Filia (Filia Center), Mame pentru Mame (Mothers for Mothers) and Pro Women will be analyzed. The novelty of this paper consists mostly in revealing their online impact on Romanian audience.

Keywords: New Media, feminism, organizations, media consumption, social networks

1. Introduction

1.1. The impact of organizations nowadays

Few aspects of modern life are untouched by formal organizations (...) Education, work, politic, government, religion, social services, charities and frequently leisure activities take place within or through the involvement of organizations with a greater or lesser degrees of structure and formalization (Handel, 2003, p.1).

Another sociologist, Anthony Giddens, expresses the unperceivable influence owned by organizations, stating an example, which became classical in sociology: *the modern birth at hospital*². Nowadays, organizations play a major part, much more important than it was during any previous periods of time. Besides being there when a man is born or dies, organizations mark our daily path: each time, when we use the phone, turn on the water tap, open the TV or we travel, we get in contact with organizations, *much more interdependent than was ever the case before. Many of our requirements are supplied by people we never meet and who indeed might live many thousands of miles away (Giddens, 2006, p.638).*

Whenever one asks about the organization's existence, will be indirectly wondering about when did they appear, why are they necessary, how will they evolve, which are the functions implied by their

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² Once, all of us were born at home. Starting with the '50s, the habit of giving birth at hospital became a common fact and this social change determined important effects upon the Modern Man. Few of us felt a special connection to the place of our birth, *a large and impersonal hospital (Giddens, 2006, pp. 312-313).*

existence and as consequence, any analyst will turn into a dead end. Oscar Hoffman recommends multidisciplinary approach for the study dedicated to organizations. The theories concerning organizations (either they are substantialist, constructivist or deconstructionist concepts) will offer different answers, without the guaranteeing that one is correct and the other ones wrong. There is a partial truth for each theory, so researchers should avoid falling into the *trap of theoretical generalization* (Hoffman, 2004, p. 53).

Organizations are diverse, because the daily life is diverse. Numerous classifications were established during the last decades. The main criteria implied were the technologies used the mechanism of authority involved in order to maintain the inner coherence and the influence performed by external medium. From our point of view, the typology created by Amitai Etzioni seems to be more appropriate to immediate aspects of reality:

► *Voluntary organizations*, to which people adhere, since they are interested in the purposes and activities proposed. The best example would be the organizations campaigning for environmental protections, whose volunteers do not receive money or similar bonus, but participate in events' development, believing in the ideal pursued.

► *Utilitarian organisations*, which overlap the voluntary organisations, but, unlike them, the last type of organisations are larger and usually economically oriented towards everyday life, including state and private enterprises or business associations.

► *Coercive organisations*, such as prisons or mental hospitals, in which people are forced to enter and end by having a small contact with the external environment (Etzioni, 1975, p. 235).

As a recent direction of studying organisations, we can notify the ascent of the so-called *Japanese model*, as a major critique against Weber's way of perceiving organisations. Comparing with Weber's standards¹, Japanese companies seem to rely on contradictory features, as follows:

- *Bottom-up decision-making*. Japanese corporations are not based on a pyramid of authority as Weber portrayed it, with each level being responsible to the one above. Instead of this idea, workers from low levels are consulted about every decision concerning the company itself.
- *Less specialization*. In Japanese organisations, employees specialize less than their counterparts in the West, but they are familiar with all important tasks required by the company, due to the practice of job rotation.
- *Job security*. Japanese corporations are committed to lifetime employment. Payment and rewarding the performance are geared to seniority rather than to a competitive struggle for promotion.
- *Group-oriented production*. At all levels of the corporation, people are involved in small teams, which are evaluated in terms of global performance.
- *Merging work and private life*. Unlike the separation proposed by Weber, the Japanese corporations provide financial support for their employees' needs, expecting in return a high level of loyalty (Giddens, 2006, pp.665-666).

1.2. Feminist organizations

Theories about feminist organization tend to be controversial, even today. For instance, Myra Marx Ferree, Patricia Yancey Martin state that *one cannot define the feminist movement only through the formal organizations that facilitate and direct its activities in any country (...)* But few feminists feel accountable to particular organizations for their actions. *The movement that inspires them and can*

¹ Generally speaking, an organisation can be characterized through a fixed pyramidal hierarchy, the officials or the employees should make a straight difference between work and family as social media, the employees are selected according to their performance and can be anytime dismissed, an employee can be promoted only by taking in account his/her performance and the general functioning of the organization is proved by written rules (Lafaye, 1998, pp. 16-17)

ask sacrifice from them is far broader than that (...) Each individual's application of feminist analysis to her daily life and each establishment of a feminist presence within a mainstream organization contribute to the feminist movement. The location is less important than the action (Marx Ferree & Yancey Martin, 1995, p.17).

The point of view adopted in this research is that feminist organizations are rooted in the development of alternative forms of social structures, different to the bureaucratic, characterized through seven variables: 1) *commitment to social change*; 2) *values of equality and collegial participation in governance*; 3) *new services meeting the needs of a special population*; 4) *exploratory and innovative services*; 5) *personal commitment of organization to the cause*; 6) *smallness in organizational size and 7) marginal economic position within the larger service system* (Metzendorf, 2005, p.1). Feminist organizations are an example of alternative organizations, if one takes in account those features. Having surfaced during the mid-seventies, feminist organizations dealt with unmet needs of women, such as victimization, lack of power and politically, economically vulnerability of women in a patriarchal society. As women's movement outgrew, feminist organizations acted as vehicles for social change, for the simple reason that comparing with other type of alternative organizations, feminist one were women-controlled, women-managed and mainly addressed to women. More feminists, like the below mentioned author, make a clear difference between reading feminism literature and believing that a person is a feminist and the true fight, outside in the streets, for fulfilling feminist ideals. Feminism nowadays tends to become a wider social movement, as *many feminist organizations have started to work on issues such as globalization, militarism and various forms of fundamentalism, and to address such contemporary challenges with fresher, innovative approaches and new perspectives* (Durán, Payne & Russo, 2007, p.41).

As social, active body, any feminist organization is subject of changes. When Zimbabwe achieved independence in 1980 the few women's organizations that existed were generally focused on improving the economic situation of women, such as teaching them to set up and run income projects, in order to reduce poverty. In the mid-1980s women's organizations changed their emphasis from income generation to women's empowerment through education aimed at raising awareness of their political, human rights. As a result, a number of organizations focused on advocacy for women's rights and equality, violence against women, legal services, health issues and the role in politics and media (Durán, Payne & Russo, 2007, p. 131).

One of European key-concepts, Freedom of movement, causes serious social troubles, not only feminist ones. Lydia Alpízar Durán gives the example of migrant women in Hamburg, who *unlike migrant men, who generally find employment in agriculture, industry, construction or manufacturing, most of the work available to migrant women is in traditionally **feminine**, socially devalued service areas: caring for the elderly, the sick and the children; domestic work and the sex industry. And this work, as it usually takes place outside the formal economy, is poorly paid. Moreover, it tends to fall outside the scope of labour legislation, thus exacerbating the vulnerability of women. In Hamburg, there is a significant presence of Latin American women seeking employment* (Durán, Payne & Russo, 2007, p. 140).

Women worldwide are searching their own path, with the help of feminist organisations. For instance, in Israel a strongly traditional state, antagonist feminist organizations managed to surpass differences for the fulfilment of a common cause: Women need to be hurt. *Mizrahi women*, traditionally reckoned as *Israeli women*, created Ahoti (*sister in Hebrew*), an organization devoted to representing underprivileged women, helping and aiding those who are deprived of their labour rights. On the other side, *Lesbian women* also gained confidence and a strong voice in the public arena after setting up their own organization in 1992 and becoming more visible with their demand for equal rights in society. Finally, *Palestinian women* also started establishing new organizations and setting up projects while the feminist conferences were taking place. *These tended to oscillate between working with Jewish women and the need to maintain their independence* (Durán, Payne & Russo, 2007, p.206).

2. Romanian Feminist Organizations

2.1. Centrul Filia (Filia Centre), located in Bucharest, is one of the most popular feminist organizations in Romania, according to the number of online members on Facebook community and the recurrent present in news. At the present, the Filia's page functions as a *feminist agenda*, where news and facts about feminism as social and contemporary movement, famous women, improved European politics or local Romanian struggles for showing the Feminist Cause that are made¹. The following examples are one of the most recent, chosen at random, in order to prove the already mentioned assumption: *Close to you: Women in politics*², an interview with Roberta Angelli, an Italian female politician; *Future of Feminism: 50 Global for Women and Girls*³, focused mostly on Indian women's need or *Top 10 European states offering the best living conditions for women*⁴.

While talking about internal deeds for promoting feminism, it is noticeable the online impact obtained. For instance, the post *Feminist Revolution/Occupying the patriarchy*⁵, gathered 20 likes and 5 comments. Although, these statistics on the spot seem to be infinitesimal, comparing with similar posts on the same social network, for this research are important, since they prove that the message launched by a feminist organization has a certain influence on the target-audience, women and media, and the secondary audience, represented mainly by men.

One can expect that a feminist message should stir the interest and passion of women, finding their needs and hopes reflected by feminist organizations' or similar social structures. For instance, a female user like Laura Craciun notes feverishly on the already quoted post: *I want to trample it (the patriarchy-our note) underfoot and destroy it once and for good! So that it could become history and could never hurt again a woman!* Men's opinions inside feminist articles aren't very common, but demonstrate that feminist messages aren't indifferent to them. The following example might seem harsh, quite misogynist, but it is an evidence of the existence of a secondary audience for feminist message. Caton Musculeanu states that *before starting singing and dancing, I would like to hear an explanation. 8th March was for you a joyful moment, at least this was my first impression, reading your Facebook wall. But on Valea Jiului, the patriarchy did what it knew better.*



Figure 1 Protests in Bucharest for women's rights

¹ Picture retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2749073812054&set=a.2749069371943.2115386.1413849973&type=1&theater>, date: 11.02.2012.

² Retrieved from <http://europartv.europa.eu/en/player.aspx?pid=9d8157bd-afe9-4293-88ff-a00d017c9b26>, date: 09.02.2012.

³ Retrieved from <http://msmagazine.com/blog/blog/2012/03/08/future-of-feminism-50-global-solutions-for-women-and-girls/>, date: 09.02.2012.

⁴ Retrieved from http://media.imopedia.ro/stiri-imobiliare/top-10-state-care-ofera-cele-mai-bune-conditii-de-trai-femeilor-18875.html?utm_medium=RSS, date: 09.02.2012.

⁵ Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100001621218668>, date: 11.02.2012.

Seldom does a feminist message become a piece of news¹, but when it does, editors usually choose to rate it as *worthy*, if it brings a degree of novelty or outstanding appearance. This is the case of the protest organized by *Mame pentru Mame (Mothers for Mothers)*, encouraged by Filia Centre². A group of mothers expressed their disappointment against the reduction of maternity leave, including the amount of money dedicated to the raise of babies. The protesting mothers took with them their children, fact that stirred controversial reactions, concerning their safety.

2.2. Mame pentru mame (Mothers for Mothers)³, also located in Bucharest, as its name indicates, is focused on a specific section of womanhood, the status of a mother. Besides stories of famous or less popular women doing their best for their children⁴, *Mothers for Mothers* developed an intense social activity. For instance, the Romanian feminist organization took attitude against a draft legislation, concerning the legal framework for surrogate mothers: *It is essential that the financial element not to be the only reason why some women would commit to bear the child of an infertile couple and much more, this recent practice needs to be strongly regulated, in terms of eligibility criteria for those seeking a surrogate mother⁵*. The concerns raised by Mothers for Mothers are well founded, since in the period when the legislation project was debated in Parliament, little importance was given by media or civil society to the topic. Romania cannot be compared with India, in terms of raising number of *surrogate mothers*, but the authorized institutions have to take in account that poor women might be interested by this method, in order to make a living.



Figure 2 Mothers for Mothers` logo

Comparing with the previous feminist organization, Filia Centre, the organization dedicated to mothers received a reduced feedback like two or three *likes* for a post and little appetite for commenting the topic, justified through the permanent tendency of Romanian women to become mothers at a more mature age, between 30 years old and 35 years old⁶, so the idea of a group informing and protecting their interests starts to sound interesting in that period of time.

¹ This affirmation belongs to a leader of one of feminist organizations in Romania, Oana Baluta, who posted on Facebook a commentary stating that mainstream press is actually quite reticent to feminist requests, retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100001621218668>, date: 11.03.2012.

² Retrieved from http://www.rtv.net/protestul-ciumpalacelor-de-8-martie-piata-universitatii-a-fost-ocupata-de-mamici_19876.html, date: 08.03.2012.

³ Logo retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=295639660458215&set=a.238354772853371.63457.238349239520591&type=3&theater>, date: 11.03.2012.

⁴ We noticed the articles dedicated to Beyoncé, breastfeeding in public (retrieve from http://www.realitatea.net/beyonce-si-a-atras-simpatia-mamelor-din-intreaga-lume-vezi-ce-gest-indraznet-a-facut_918711.html, date: 10.03.2012) or the blog focused on the stories of mother fighting with death for their children, retrieved from <http://fiercemamas.blogspot.com.au/2009/10/saving-my-baby.html>, date: 01.03.2012.

⁵ Retrieved from http://www.mamepentrumame.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=247, date: 11.03.2012.

⁶ Retrieved from <http://www.ziare.com/viata-sanatoasa/insarcinata/numarul-mamelor-care-au-pesto-40-de-ani-la-primul-copil-s-a-triplat-1017988>, date: 01.03.2012.

2.3. Pro Women¹, located in Iasi, tends to function more as a regional feminist organization rather than a national one. Comparing with the previous two examples, *Pro Women* is focused on pragmatic aspects for a woman, such as obtaining a professional degree, business consulting or project management, since the organization itself is supported by an European grant. Another notable difference is that *Pro Women* promotes itself only through the agency of its site, social networks and other elements of New Media seem not to capture the interest of the organization.

At this moment, Pro Women develops a project in the poorest rural communities, in order to make women, especially housewives, understand that a professional degree in bakery or trade is a key to a better life.



Our future work will attempt to expand the content analysis to other Romanian feminist organization. The research will also attempt to gather the resemblances and differences perceived in the way Romanian and European organizations state to function. Among European organizations, I will analyze the activity of European Women's Lobby, New Women for Europe, Women in Action, The European Feminist Forum and European Professional Women's Network.

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¹ Picture retrieved from <http://prowomen.ro/iasi/index.php?langId=2>, date: 09.03.2012.