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ROMANIA

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Romanian Women in Transition

By Cristina Merrill

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BUCHAREST, Romania – I'm at a camp for gym instructors to do research on sports in Romania, trying to find a decent place to jog, when I find "Carmen" — or rather she finds me. I'm not in a talkative mood, as I haven't yet recovered from the morning's 7 o'clock mandatory "invigorative" exercises on an empty stomach. I'm still sore from yesterday's power Tae-Bo session and two hours of fitness dance lessons. I have just emerged from numerous sessions on sports theory I haven't had time to digest.

The three grilled wursts we were given for breakfast somehow fall short of providing the energy I need to surmount the obstacles on the way to the local stadium — a barking German shepherd dog menacing me by the locked entrance, puddles and weeds everywhere. I jump the fence — the beast is thankfully caged — to find more puddles and weeds. The rusted sign at one end of this seemingly abandoned place, only one hour north of Bucharest, reads "Sport Health Beauty."

A thin blond man appears and starts to mow the grass on the field, in preparation for an upcoming soccer match. The stadium belongs to the local refinery, I later learn. Since soccer, unlike recreational sports, is popular and brings money, some effort is invested in the upkeep of the playing field — but not the running track. The man, whose tanned upper frame conveys raw physical strength, is the caretaker. He is shirtless. Soon his wife emerges, carrying a cup of coffee in one hand and in the other a young longhaired terrier, which she gently puts down. The dog starts to chase me playfully, which is enough of an opener for Carmen (not her real name) to start a conversation. Her husband, a man of few words, had sent her on a mission to inform me that the owner of the stadium charges a hefty amount for the use of the field and to avoid paying I ought to come after 4 p.m., when the "chief" goes home. I'm too tired to consider whether I'm being asked for a bribe.

In her late twenties, Carmen is wearing a plain red T-shirt, cotton shorts, flip-flops. Her black hair is pulled up in a bun with magenta tones, a sign she hasn't colored her hair in a while. Despite early wrinkles forming around her smooth olive face, her brown eyes are youthful. She keeps looking down. The rare time that she smiles I can see she is missing a front tooth. She speaks fast. Looking apologetically at herself, she says she has been trying to lose weight (though she looks thin) and wishes she could run too, but that the recent passing away of a cousin has ruined her appetite.

"My stomach has been churning for weeks," she says. "It's eating me alive. I try and think of happier things but all I see is dark. Something bad is going to happen." Carmen says she feels guilty she wasn't at the bedside of her cousin, whom she considered a sister. She has been going to church and asking for forgiveness. "I have committed many sins," she says. "I smoke, and that's a vice. I've [aborted] a baby. Had I known it would have been a boy, I would have kept him. I would never bring up a girl in this world. It's too hard for us."

Without any prompting from me, she says that her parents, as well as seven

siblings and other close relatives, moved away to Spain. Her husband beats her when he drinks. It has happened less frequently since she took him to have a word with the local priest. I can tell she doesn't know what to do. She says she doesn't even know why they got married, except that making a living in Romania is really hard, especially as a single person. She's tired of renting dumpy apartments. She says the caretaker's house, which looks damp, dark and small from the outside, is a paradise compared to the places the couple has inhabited in the last six months. She talks about leaving the husband if the beating continues but then, later on, mentions that they're considering moving to Italy together. "We've been through a lot." She doesn't have a job, I'm not even sure she finished high school. We end the conversation when the man approaches. "Come on, woman, bring me some cigarettes from the house," he says and smiles for my benefit. She and I exchange phone numbers. She calls me a few days later in gratitude. "Thanks, you seemed so open to listen. It felt good to have someone to talk to."

Love Hurts

Carmen's case is not isolated. Domestic violence is a serious problem for women in Romania — a problem that is just starting to be acknowledged in the mainstream media. While many of the victims are young, mostly uneducated women, abuse affects women of all economic backgrounds. In fact, a leading feminist and intellectual is said to be a domestic-violence victim at the hands of her husband, an intellectual.

Albeit not on the scale it happens in Italy or Turkey, for example, sexual harassment is and has long been a fact of life in Romania. Men harass women ("it makes men



Love can hurt in Romania

feel manly," a friend says) whenever they can. When I complained to an official about a journalist's refusal to take No for an answer, I got the following advice in writing: "Keep in mind that Romanian men typically make advances to attractive women. It is a national 'sport.' I don't wish to flatter you but you are an attractive woman so please prepare yourself to suffer the 'consequences.'"

I understand harassment is widespread in the workplace (there are lots of jokes about ways by which women get promoted, especially in banks) and sadly, at the university level. Mihaela Popescu, a graphic designer, says she quit medical school after four years, disgusted with the sexual favors she was asked to perform for various professors, in order to get good grades. Recently, an undercover media investigation found such a serial harasser at the University of the city of Cluj.

Experts say that violence against women is emblematic of a gender-identity and -relationship crisis in today's Romania, a crisis made acute by the country's difficult transition from Communism. They say that the impact on a highly patriarchal society of an emerging-market economy, which for now has brought more poverty and uncertainty than visible progress, is making for a chaotic brew that is particularly harmful to the Romanian woman, sometimes called the Cinderella of society — but affects the Romanian man as well.

"Craziness reigns in Romania today," says Florin Tudose, a well-known psychiatrist. "People today have a very deformed idea of themselves, their sexuality and relations between the sexes." Mr. Tudose adds that the way an increasing number of Romanians choose to cope with the stress of uncertainty is alcohol, which compounds violence and feelings of alienation.

Because of a highly traditional, religious and paternalistic society, women have been subservient to men, long regarded as the heads of the family and society. In the years leading up to Communism — a period social analysts call the traditional patriarchal period when 80 percent of the population was involved in agriculture — women had few rights, even though they were expected to work just as hard as men on the farms and raise the family. Women voted in Romania for the first time in 1946, while the 1990 elections, after the revolution, were the first democratic elections in which they took part as candidates. Even now, women are feeble participants in politics. Only 6 percent of senators and 11 percent of deputies are women. Women serve as mayors in only two of Romania's 263 cities and municipalities.

While Communism preached equality between sexes and the political "emancipation of women through work," socially it preserved the status quo. Men still held prestigious leadership jobs in industry, with bosses typically selected from among holders of male-dominated degrees, such as engineers. In schools, girls learned to



Many Romanian men are turning to alcohol, and violence, in transition.

sew while boys were initiated into male trades, which prepared them for professions that later ensured them leadership positions in the “heavy industries” that were seen as the more desirable by the state. Women worked a “double-day” as salaried employees and keepers of the home. Women held demanding jobs in industrial fields, while at home they were expected to be both proper housekeepers (the mark of a “good” Romanian wife has long been that of a good cook who can put together a complex meal on command) as well as feminine wives.

I see it every day— hard-working women on the street or in shops, with tired, worried looks but always a smile ready for customers. It has been my experience that in the service industry women are the more customer-friendly workers, always ready to hold out the plastic bag, to thank you with a genuine look for shopping there. Even when they serve an equal function to women, Romanian men dread being regarded as subservient. When I asked an unoccupied waiter to bring another glass of mineral water, he said it was the “girl’s” job to serve; his was to “supervise.” On a trip to the countryside to visit an agricultural museum as part of an archeological tour, I was struck by the hierarchy of the place. The male director of the museum came out to greet the visitors and ordered the five women staffers to bring out drinks and food. The women readily obliged and then stood silently in the background as the director gave a long speech about the importance of maintaining traditions in the countryside.

Women regard looking pleasant in public as their duty. I was struck one day by the glow of the saleswoman at my corner store. I make it a point to stop in to chat with her, whose name is also Cristina. This day, however, she looked particularly good: lips made up in hot pink, her blue eyes defined by a matching eyeliner, her

blond hair neatly tucked into a bun underneath a headband, part of her uniform.

I knew her life hasn’t been easy: her husband was recently laid off, she makes \$100 a month, they live with two teenage daughters in a cramped apartment on the outskirts of Bucharest. They want to move into a larger space but they can’t afford anything else. They would like to take a loan to buy an apartment and have been turned down by all the banks they have applied to. I asked Cristina why she was so cheerful. She said she didn’t know; she had worked 14-hour-days for three days in a row and then spent the weekend helping the husband paint the walls in the house. “What can I do but forge ahead?” she said. “Drowning in sorrow doesn’t do my family any good. Plus, putting on make-up reminds me I’m a

woman after all.”

Being a woman was especially difficult during Communism. Because of the dictator’s pro-natalist policies, which sought to vastly increase the country’s population, the Romanian woman was not only expected, but also forced, to obey her duty as mother to the nation. Feminists say that the Romanian woman answered to two bosses — the husband and the state, and in the process lost even the rights to her own body.

Nicolae Ceausescu’s draconian 1966 anti-abortion law imposed random gynecological exams on women and heavy prison fines on anyone helping them abort. Contraceptives were forbidden. Despite the law, women still resorted to illegal abortion — many performed their own in the absence of willing accomplices — with tragic results. Statistics show that between 1976 and 1989, more than 7,000 women died as a result of illegal abortions, though some say that the numbers are much higher in reality, since maternal death rates were often altered to fit official purposes.

In this authoritarian environment, where individuals had no rights to privacy, great emphasis was placed on protecting the family for social and political purposes. The state, which rationed people’s food and most consumer needs, even had a say in people’s choice of partners. While pornography and prostitution were forbidden, harassment and domestic violence were not. “We entered the post-Communism era with distorted views on the concepts of rights,” writes Mihaela Miroiu in her book, “The Road to Autonomy.”

More than half of those polled in a 2000 “Gender Barometer” study commissioned by the Foundation for an Open Society said they personally knew cases where men

beat their female partners. A recent study by the Partnership Center for Equality in Bucharest shows that last year 800,000 women were victims of various forms of violence, including physical, sexual or psychological. According to often-quoted statistics by women's organizations, 13 percent of female victims of domestic violence died in 1998 in this country. It is estimated that for the same period, violence against women was the basis of 60 percent of divorce cases in Bucharest. According to a cover article published last November in the Romanian edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the number of Romanian women victims of domestic violence has grown seven times from 1996 to 2002.

In my first few weeks here I witnessed a couple of instances of violence. I stumbled onto the first one on my way home one afternoon. As I turned the corner near a market, I spotted a young man using his fists on a woman, whom I presume was his girlfriend; once he had her down on the ground he hit her with his legs all over the body, including the neck and the face. I stopped, in shock. She finally got away, crying. I didn't know what to do. New to Bucharest, I didn't even know what number to dial to call the police. Strangely, nobody else did anything either. Romanians normally stare at anything out of the ordinary, but this time around I detected little reaction around me. About a week later, I was on a bus when I saw a similar episode involving a man physically harming a woman in public. Nobody intervened, but those around me who saw the same thing grew quiet. They were as silent as the woman with the black eye I saw one day in a supermarket coffee shop, eating her sandwich with her head down.

The Feminist Couple

The Wife: The stress here is extraordinary

Motivated to learn more about this problem and about the kind of support women here get, I started researching women's organizations. There are some 60 non-governmental women's organizations (NGOs), most of them started in the last decade. They are typically small, with fewer than ten staffers apiece, and address a variety of issues from professional to local.

For my first visit I chose *Societatea de Analize Feministe* AnA (Society of Feminist Analyses AnA), a respected ten-year-old group of intellectuals that publishes *AnAlize* magazine. AnA was founded the leading feminist, author Mihaela Miroiu, who's also a professor of political ethics and feminist political theory at the National School of Political and Administrative Science in Bucharest and is the originator of the first Master's degree in Gender Studies in Romania in 1998. There are now three such full-time programs in the country. On vacation through the end of August, Ms. Miroiu wasn't available for an interview.

At AnA's headquarters, a tiny two-room office in a

residential building, I met with the president, Cristina Ilinca.

She was the only one in the office when I arrived. A graduate student who works part-time came in later on. A few minutes into our conversation, Ms. Ilinca handed me a recent copy of *go4it!*, a glossy supplement of a respected financial daily newspaper. The cover showed two scantily dressed, bosomy young women sporting digital cameras. The cover headline read, "Spicy offers you close to 200 gadgets that are spicy." "This tells you about all you need to know about sexual and gender confusion in this country at the moment," she said.

Ms. Ilinca said that in the last 15 years Romanians have absorbed certain "capitalistic" notions of the market economy, such as readily available sex. In Romania the idea of a "sexy" woman is in vogue, even though it is often portrayed in poor taste and is demeaning to the woman. Gender consciousness has also suffered, as people have "thrown out what happened in Communism, including equality between the sexes," which was forced on people. "But you can't negate everything that happened, or you risk negating yourself. People remember equality for Communism in a very bad light," she said.

Romanian history has few Romanian women as role models, other than sacrificial wives and mothers. Bucharest's streets, often named for important people, list only a handful, and most of them are spouses; the rest carry names of various male figures, under headings that could be generalized as "political man," or "diplomatic man" or "historical man." Women aren't valued on their own, unless they're married or at least have a boyfriend at all times. Now, being a sexpot can carry a certain weight as well. It struck me recently that the Romanian words for "odd" and "even" (as in "odd" and "even" numbers) translate as "with husband" (even) and "without husband" (odd). The last known strongwoman, the dictator's wife Elena Ceausescu, was utterly despised, which provides another excuse for not appreciating



*Cristina Ilinca, president of women's NGO
Society of Feminist Analyses AnA*



“Sexy” women sell financial magazine covers in Romania.

driven women. If they’re too career-oriented or demanding, women here are said to have “unusually manly” characteristics. Romania is still a society that bows to “bosses,” most of whom are still male. A recent poll shows that of all Romanian institutions, the army and the church garner the highest levels of confidence, with 77 and 82 percent of those polled, respectively.

An adverse reaction to Communist doctrine, as well as a traditional inherited mentality, has made it difficult for women’s groups such as AnA to make a difference. Ms. Ilinca and other heads of women’s NGOs say they struggle financially because there is great competition for meager funding. The criticism has been that women’s organizations have remained marginalized because of a lack of feminine solidarity and because of a gap between academic-oriented organizations, such as AnA, and activist ones. When I asked Ms. Ilinca to direct me to one of the two shelters for battered women I’d heard exist in Bucharest, she could not come up with a name or a location.

Because they are not self-sufficient, organizations such as hers spend a lot of time applying for grants, many of which aren’t directly aligned with their purpose, a phenomenon that has come to be known here as “room-service” feminism — which is to say that the grant-receiving organization has to do “to-order” tasks for the grant-giver that have nothing to do with their stated objectives. Ms. Ilinca said the rent was covered through the end of August but it was anyone’s guess what would happen afterwards, if a grant didn’t come through. “The stress here is extraordinary. The insecurity, the constant worry about what happens tomorrow financially, at work, in the government, is terrible and it affects every-

body. That’s part of the reason violence happens. We don’t know what to expect.”

The Husband: Women have adapted better to transition from Communism

A week later I met Vladimir Pasti, a sociologist and — unbeknownst to me until the day of our appointment — Ms. Ilinca’s husband. I was interested to see Mr. Pasti because he has written an intriguing book about women’s precarious position in the Romanian society, *The Last Inequality*, and because he is a Romanian man writing about women’s issues — could he be a Romanian male feminist?

He suggested we meet near the U.S. Embassy at Hotel Batistei, which used to be a favorite meeting spot for the former Romanian Securitate, the secret police. Some say it still is. I found him in the courtyard — this centrally located hotel was strangely empty — enjoying a beer in the shade. He’s in his 50s, medium height, with a stern gaze that pierced through me. I wondered if listening devices came with this meeting. I had imagined a different kind of male feminist, but as Romanian women would say, you take what you can get. A sociology professor at the National School of Political and Administrative Science in Bucharest, Mr. Pasti has specialized in writing about the political and social aspects of Romania’s post-Ceausescu transition. He also serves as adviser to the Prime Minister on social issues.

As if to apologize for writing the book on women, Mr. Pasti starts by saying that he was paid to do it. But, he adds, alternating between Mr. Pasti-the-writer and Mr. Pasti-the-executive-adviser, discrimination against women is last on the list of political considerations, after racism, ethnic and religious intolerance. He says this happens because women in Romania have always been considered “inferior” to men and because they haven’t asked for more. “Why have they accepted this? Because nobody taught them to refuse. I need women who don’t want to



Romanian women have adapted better than men to the transition from Communism.

be inferior anymore. Women's emancipation is a prerequisite to achieving democracy in this country. ... But they need to want it themselves. Any woman who went through an abortion ought to scream. But I can't do anything if it doesn't come from them. What, should I have the Prime Minister go out on the street to mobilize them?"

Mr. Pasti says that women have adapted better than men to the transition phase. As part of privatization efforts since 1989, many of the traditionally male-dominated state industries (metallurgy of iron and steel and car making, for example) have been either restructured or eliminated. Men have taken refuge in commerce, construction (the endless construction on the streets of Bucharest is proof of that) or have declared unemployment. Many of them still exert power through powerful syndicates but on the whole more men have lost their jobs than women. The mortality rate among men aged 20 and 64 has been double that of women of the same age. Women's average life span is about 74 years of age, while men's is 67.

"If women realized their power in this country, we could have another revolution," Mr. Pasti says. Fifty-three percent of the 1 million unemployed Romanians in 2000 were male, and as privatization accelerates, the "feminization" of the Romanian work force will continue. Four of out of five of the main exporting industries (including confections and textiles) are staffed mostly by women. Also as of 2000, fifty-six percent of the salaried labor force was working in the private sector, with women making up forty-eight percent of that labor force. Mr. Pasti says: "If the trend continues, women will be the main source of income in the household and in the capitalist economy, which means that ideologically speaking, capitalism in Romania will depend on Romanian women's labor."

But, he adds, the elephant (women) is still scared of the little mouse (men). Many women are still economically dependent on men. One in five women (including students and housewives) has no income and 48 percent either have no income or earn up to about \$16 a month. He says that is because, in part, women earn about 30 percent less than men do when they do work. But there are about 3 million who don't have any income, even though many work in the house; 1.2 million are considered unpaid household workers (on family farms), the rest deemed "inactive" but still work as housewives. Some 300,000 are unemployed. Economic dependence and poverty tends to keep women from asking for their rights, he says, and it keeps them in violent domestic environments, which he says is often brought about by ignorance and fear. "The fist is a way of communication, unfortunately," he says. "Just like women need to understand their rights, we need to teach men how to understand women and themselves."

The Star: AFR, *c'est moi*

By the time I reach Liliana Pagu's office, I've had to

go through two sets of buildings, a deserted courtyard, spend quality time in a moody elevator and walk aimlessly through a dark corridor maze that led me everywhere but my destination. And it's stifling hot.

She does glow, though. Ms. Pagu, the president of the Women's Association of Romania (*Asociatia Femeilor din Romania*), or AFR, welcomes me with cookies and soda, no ice. She hasn't had time to buy a refrigerator. She recently moved AFR from the previous location, where she couldn't afford the rent. She found the current space through someone she knows. She still worries that the landlord hasn't formally agreed to house her. I fan myself to cool off, as I sit down to absorb the aura of this woman, who was once one a popular Romanian concert soprano. She is considerably heavier than she looks in pictures displayed on the wall, from performances in the 1970s in Vienna, Belgium and Denmark. She speaks with vigor and confidence. "Romania needs women leaders, I think I'm one."

Ms. Pagu says AFR is the first democratic women's organization founded after the December 1989 Revolution. The mission of her volunteer-based group (9,550 members) is to make women aware of "their responsibilities concerning economical, social, cultural activities as mothers and wives; specific problems that influence the society; specific rights they are entitled to."

Ms. Pagu takes great pride in AFR's role as a "bridge among organizations and associations that are active in the area of women's rights in Romania." The list of collaborators, or the conferences she has participated in, is dizzying, and she reads them one by one — everything from the Federation for Peace and Collaboration in the Balkans to the Black Sea Coalition against Poverty through the development of Social Services. Ms. Pagu thrives on conferences. She asks me if I'd be interested in going next morning to an out-of-town conference on pollution-prevention methods; when I give her a blank look she says, "protecting the environment is part of our duty as women citizens as well."

Ms. Pagu wears lots of hats outside AFR. She is President of the Romanian Women Business club, adviser to The Peace Alliance of Romania and the Consumer Center in Romania, and serves as manager and owner of the musical-theatre company she founded ten years ago, Alhambra. She says she often performs artistic fundraisers to help support AFR.

The one negative note she sounds is about women's lack of solidarity in Romania. She says women haven't learned to help one another and often don't know what to make of strong women leaders like her. She brings up an episode from 1996, when she ran for Mayor of Bucharest. On her way to the voting office, she says, she heard a conversation among three people, two men and a woman. After the men brought up favorable points about her candidacy, the woman started criticizing her

and arguing that Ms. Pagu would make a poor mayor because she is a woman and could not earn the respect of men. “Why did she criticize me? Out of jealousy? Women can be each other’s worst enemies sometimes.”

Sensiblue Angels

Ms. Pagu finally directs me to one of the two women’s shelters in Bucharest I had heard about. It appears this is the only fully operational one at the moment. The other, a crisis center that houses women for up to a week and is part of a health clinic, has run out of funds and uses staff from the clinic — when available.

Casa Blue, or Blue House, is a three-year-old counseling and shelter operation run under the auspices of Sensiblue, the largest pharmacy network in Romania. I make an appointment with yet another Cristina, Casa Blue executive director Cristina Horia. The addresses of both the counseling office and the shelter are unlisted, so that men can’t reach and harm their partners. Cristina tells me that they have had a few such incidents (her staffers have been called all sorts of names, including destroyers of families), which is why the shelter has 24-hour security protection.

The counseling center is hard to spot, since it is located in a large, complex building missing an address. The glass by the entrance is pierced, as by a shotgun. I call Cristina and soon enough a 25-year-old brunette comes to rescue me from the street.

I visit the counseling center a couple of times and meet with the psychologist, the social worker and the legal adviser. It’s a small operation (the girls call it their matchbox house) made up of the counseling room, the administrative office and a small kitchen. The staffers are all under 30 — bright, energetic, enthusiastic. In between discussing the seriousness of the domestic violence problem, we exchange horoscope signs, diet tips and complaints about Romanian men — we’re all Romanian women, after all. Because of its limited space, the center screens applicants carefully, seeking willingness to change the current situation as a criterion for eligibility. Last year, 124 women and 184 children benefited from Casa Blue’s Services, mostly on a counseling basis. Shelter was given to 19 of them, and their 15 children. An average of only ten women apply to the center monthly, despite the fact that local hospitals and police stations refer victims to Casa Blue. Women still see domestic violence as a private issue.

“What we do may be just a drop in the ocean compared to the need out there, but we need to start somewhere,” says Oana Nica, the group’s psychologist. “What



Oana Nica, psychologist, and Cristina Horia, executive director, Casa Blue

we do here is not just offer help short-term. We’re actually trying to change women’s mentality.” Besides toys, books and games, the counseling room displays various motivational signs: “Dear God, give me the power to calmly accept things that I cannot change. Give me the courage to change what I can change and must be changed. Give me the wisdom to tell one from the other.” Also, “If you continue doing what you’ve always done, you’ll always receive what you have always received.”

Oana says the obstacles are great. She calls women’s economic and cultural dependence on men one of the most difficult habits to break. “As a nation, we’re not taught or encouraged to be independent. We’re raised to stay close to our families, our neighbors and our friends and not to stray from the ordinary. As women, we’re taught to obey our husbands no matter if they beat us. Even parents don’t encourage abused women to leave their husbands, which in turn deforms their coping approach. Women don’t trust their own power — that they can change their lives for the better. They start thinking that as bad as it is, it may be worse elsewhere. If we solve this type of mentality, we will be able to solve a lot of things.”

Oana says the dependency cycle is harmful to all members of the family. Women grow up to view their sole meaning in life to be wives and mothers, which in turn conditions their husbands, and their children, to expect mothering. When confronted with domestic violence and the possibility of leaving their men, women fear they’ll be worthless outside a marriage. Men fear they’ll have nobody to care for them any longer. So they stay together. Oana says “coping-mechanism” counseling is offered to those who go back. I find it strange that she says that Romanian women can be guilty of “provoking” their men. “I see some of them in sessions, they’re unbearable and stubborn.” She explains that a lot of the women who come have experienced years of abuse and

are themselves hardened and inflexible, sometimes even abusive. Because they see themselves as protectors of the household, these women become overprotective, sometimes controlling, wives and mothers.

Both Oana and Cristina say that politically, the situation is improving in Romania. The government has passed a series of laws in the last two years promoting equality between the sexes and forbidding sexual harassment and violent incidents — but the biggest problem is enforcement, especially when violence is concerned. The police are still reluctant to intervene in “private” matters. Beatings need to be life-threatening in order for an inquisition to take place, but getting to that stage involves great effort (a medical examination, long waits, costs), which deters an already undecided woman. And if the police do manage to slap a fine, the cost is paid out of the family’s budget, which doesn’t help matters.

Even for those willing to make a change, lack of financial means to rent an apartment or pay for kids’ schooling or kindergarten can stop women from leaving a violent domestic situation. Most landlords don’t allow single women with children. Casa Blue helps women look for work and pays for living and schooling costs for the time women are at the shelters, a maximum of six months. Reading through some of the thank-you letters women compose after their stay, I can tell how much the help is appreciated — and how needed it is. One woman writes about how lucky she has been to find the Sensiblu women, who helped her find “anchors in a turbulent world in which I’m still afraid to venture. It’s sufficient to watch [these women] and realize that life deserves to be lived, that it can actually be beautiful.”

Results have been encouraging. Last year, 55 percent of clients moved into their own apartments following a stay in the shelter, but 16.7 percent decided to move back home.

The day I visited the actual shelter, I learned that a client and her two children had just moved out, back to an alcoholic husband. Cristina tells me she had stayed the full six months and had even been offered a good job as housekeeper in Italy. “It’s very sad but we need to remind ourselves we’re not God. Maybe in time we’ll change this harmful inertia,” she says.

A penchant for violence

Having grown up Romanian, I can attest to an undercurrent of violence. Originally it may have derived from this country’s turbulent beginnings and then was carried on by each generation to the next — under equally turbulent auspices. The earliest known inhabitants of Romania, the Dacians (a Thracian tribe), were considered peaceful shepherds, and yet they had to contend with Roman colonization, starting in the 1st century AD. Between the third and the seventh centuries came barbar-



“Romanian society is predisposed to violence,” *Cosmo* says.

ian invasions by Goths, Huns, Avars and Slavs. Transylvania fell under Hungarian rule in the 11th century, and all the way through the beginning of the 20th century fragmented Romanians were trying to form an identity while juggling compromises and wars with the Hungarians to the North, and Ottomans and Tatars to the South and East. Forty years of Communism, starting in the 1940s, served only to deepen the broken psyche of a shaken and tightly wound people. The bloody 1989 Revolution is proof of how close to the surface Romanians’ raw nerves are.

The threat, and use, of corporal punishment is used here as a way of disciplining a child. Parents warn children that they will be “beaten,” “slapped,” or “killed.” The expression “*te omor*,” which translates as “I’ll kill you,” is so commonly used that it lacks the impact it would have in the Western world. Children here have been threatened with death so many times by their parents that they scoff at the menace. The same expression is also used lovingly among adults. They’ll say something along the lines of, “I’ll kill you if you won’t come kiss me this minute,” or “I’ll beat you for not calling when you said you would.”

Last November’s Romanian *Cosmo* article addressed this cultural peculiarity, which Romanians sometimes defend as a Latin manifestation inherited from the Romans: “If you put together our old sayings and popular wisdom, you easily reach the conclusion that Romanian society is predisposed to violence. Only we console the child with the expression, “a mom’s beating makes for fertile ground” or when joking with friends say, “one ought not to hit a woman

with a flower but with a whole flower pot.”

I can think of lots of aphorisms from my childhood that have violent overtones or poke fun at women: “What’s worse than a woman? Two.” Or: “A woman’s wisdom tooth comes after death.” And: “A woman who isn’t beaten is like a mill that isn’t chained.” Publication in the April 2000 issue of *Romanian Playboy* of an article on “How to beat your wife without leaving any marks” received more protests from abroad than domestically. The complaint filed by women’s organizations made few waves in Romania.

The Sacrificial Wife

“The general rhetoric in Romanian culture has been ... one of sacrifice for a cause (in the case of women, for the family),” writes Miroiu. “We don’t have traditions that respect the individual, and certainly no hedonistic traditions to legitimize the pursuit of happiness of personal fulfillment.”

Indeed, many say that two works in the Romanian folk literature define the country’s spirit of sacrifice and resignation. One is the epic poem *Miorita*, which tells the story of a young shepherd who is warned by his young black sheep, Miorita (a diminutive of Mioara, a girl’s name), that his fellow shepherds plan to murder him and take his flock. The young shepherd accepts his fate, looking forward to his death as a magnificent sacred marriage.

The other poem is the Legend of Master Manole, a ballad about a mason who is building a church for a landowner. After four days of fruitless building, with the walls endlessly falling down, the mason dreams that the first woman who comes the following morning to bring food for her husband or brother must be sacrificed if the church is ever to be completed.

Manole can’t believe his bad luck the next morning when he sees, approaching in the distance, his own pregnant wife, Ana, bringing him wine and food. He prays to God to send down torrential rains and wind to stop her. Nothing keeps this woman from her goal, though, and Manole reluctantly keeps his promise by sealing her within the completed church walls. We later learn that the landowner is so pleased with the finished church that he traps Manole and his workers on top of the building, so that they can never build another one like it. As Manole hears the cries of his wife from the inside, he jumps to his death, and a water fountain springs in the place where he lands, a symbol of eternal creation.

A leading feminist said that she wishes that Romanians could see that the sacrificial act was nothing more than the murder of a woman by men. I wonder if she’s seen a recent TV commercial for a cell-phone company that “adapts” the legend to our times: A team of builders

succeeds in building an edifice, with the help of cell communication, without paying a high price. The catch? The chief builder walls up his wife ... but *accidentally leaves his cell phone with her*. The director of the ad agency said that this was just a bit of “Romanian dark humor. Romanians don’t consider the end of the original story a tragedy; they’re used to it.”

The Good / Bad Woman

Some say that people’s perception of women as inferior beings may in part be blamed on the Romanian Orthodox Church, which instructs women, on the day of their marriage to “submit” and “fear” their husbands. A woman is not supposed to enter the church during her menstruation period. Boys are brought up to the altar during christening, while girls are not. A woman who has given birth is considered “unclean” for six weeks, if a girl was born to her, or three weeks, if a son was brought to life. Romanians held on to their faith, so strong before Communism, even during authoritarian times — and then embraced it with renewed vigor in the years since the 1989 Revolution. Ana’s Ilinca says that in the last 15 years of uncertainty, the church has provided a safe heaven. Also, half the country still lives in the countryside, which is typically very conservative and religious.

Transition in Romania, as in most other former Communist countries, has also brought to the fore values anathema to religion and conservative tradition: sex, materialism, friction between the sexes and problems in the household. As a result, Barbie-type sexy images of women have been added to those of women as maternal beings. Mihaela Miroiu says that some women have coped with the changes by creating images of themselves in which they combine feminine qualities with maternity, as is the case with Eastern European dating services that cater to Western men (offering, for example, “Russian brides”). “The fight for survival in a world where workplaces have greatly diminished takes on previously unimaginable forms. Many women go abroad in various roles: to do housework as ‘docile’ wives to Western men who have had enough of ‘emancipated women’; or for pornography and prostitution (voluntary or forced).”

And yet, considering how important women’s looks rate in Romanian society, I don’t think the jump to sexification of women has been that great. It’s just that it’s now commercially allowed, and both sides are making the most of it for their benefit. While sex wasn’t glorified, sexuality was always part of the culture. I dare say that in some respects it was less repressed than in the West. Nudist beaches existed during Communism. Young girls don’t start wearing bathing suit tops until teenage years (a practice that ironically may change now due to Western taboos). Romanian women sometimes read *Playboy* to assess the “competition.”

Portraying Romanian women as bombshells doesn’t



"Why the woman cannot be equal to the man?" is the headline in this magazine about sex.

saw the part that said that women's and men's brains were of different sizes.

Some say that men control the largest percent of prostitution in Romania. Romania is a key originator and transit country for sex trafficking, and the bosses are men here, too. But many Romanian women willingly sell their bodies to make extra money. Some do it for the benefit of a night out or a meal, some accept longer-term arrangements by which they receive financial support from their "sponsors." I know women who have such sponsors, typically older foreign men who pay their living expenses. "What else can I do?" says one of them, a recent university graduate. "I can't live on \$100 a month. I need to survive and I'd like to have nice clothes." The comment reminds me of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's movie, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, which deals with the hardships German people went through after World War II. The heroine has lost all her family and friends and, thinking that she has lost her husband, becomes a prostitute, just to make ends meet. When she finally finds her husband and tells him she slept with someone else, he asks whether the world has become heartless after the war. "I don't know how other people are..." Maria answers. It's a bad time for emotions."

Not all young Romanians are that rational in their choice of partners. I know a husband and wife who could serve as an example of what a happy Romanian couple can be. Cora and Radu Motoc married for love. A lot of qualities seem to help keep their marriage alive — respect for each other's independence and individuality, equal partnership at home, common intellectual interests. Cora says her mother-in-law would be horrified to know that Radu does dishes and irons. It seems he would be among the 5 percent of Romanian men who help with childrearing. One of the key rules to a successful marriage in Romania, she says, is not to live with in-laws. Unfortunately, few Romanians can afford that at the mo-

mean, however, that they are taken seriously all of a sudden. A recent issue of *Totul Despre Sex* (*Everything About Sex*), a magazine for men and women that openly discusses previous taboos and is edited by Bebe Mihaiescu, Romania's Dr. Ruth Westheimer, has an article on why woman cannot be equal to man. The layout, as pictured, is "super sexy," as they would say here — except that the text is demeaning. I stopped reading that particular article, written by a woman, after I

ment. While they have known each other for seven years, Cora and Radu got married in a civil ceremony last year. The church wedding comes next year. "I can't wait to put on the wedding band and let everyone know I'm taken," Radu says. The one aspect of being married they don't enjoy, apparently is having to spend time with other young married couples who obsess over buying — the latest house gadgets, the car, the vacation.

The urge to acquire and possess nice things, now that they are available, is so prioritized, especially among wealthier people, that it is even affecting people's choice of partners. Here, men complain that women won't look at them unless they have the right foreign car, good-make clothes, an apartment and good prospects. "I wonder if Romanian women even know what love means," says an English friend, Mark Percival, who has had a few unhappy romantic experiences. One woman I know, Adriana Soholodeanu, says she wouldn't consider a man who earns what she earns, or less, as a suitable partner. She is a 27-year-old executive with a real-estate company, earning a middle-class salary and yet she hopes to find a wealthier partner who will help provide for her and her child, should she decide to have one (she is afraid she will gain weight if she gets pregnant).

In this year's August issue, *Cosmo* published the results of an informal poll taken by the editor-in-chief, in which Romanian women ("young, intelligent, dynamic") were asked whom they would pick as partner. The choice was between a professor-type man, good-looking, sensitive, caring, attentive and interested in long-term partnership, and a rich, ill-tempered and controlling man. Most women chose the latter. "In this society, where the emphasis is placed on external, rather than internal, beauty we often fall prey to the seduction of materialism when choosing a partner," the editor writes. "We do this allowing ourselves to be influenced by someone else's money, power, career and reputation." I wonder if the trend is just a continuation of the Romanian woman's quest of dependence on her husband — or her ultimate revenge on the Romanian male. □



Cora and Radu Motoc, Romanians in love

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Alexander Brenner (June 2003 - 2005) • **CHINA**

With a B.A. in History from Yale in 1998 and a Master's degree in China Studies and International Economics from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Alex in China, focused on the impact of a new government and a new membership in the World Trade Organization on Chinese citizens, institutions and regions both inside and far from the capital.

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005-2007) • **INDIA**

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney will spend two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Cristina Merrill (May 2004 - 2006) • **ROMANIA**

Born in Bucharest, Cristina moved from Romania to the United States with her mother and father when she was 14. Learning English (but retaining her Romanian), she majored in American History at Harvard College and there became captain of the women's tennis team. She received a Master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1994, worked for several U.S. publications from *Adweek* to the *New York Times*, and will now spend two years in Romania watching it emerge from the darkness of the Ceausescu regime into the presumed light of membership in the European Union and NATO.

Matthew Rudolph (January 2004-2006) • **INDIA**

Having completed a Cornell Ph.D. in International Relations, Matt is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot South Asia Fellow looking into the securitization and development of the Indian economy.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation, Matt is spending two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt is also examining long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • **GERMANY**

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

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