

# **Inevitable Illegal Abortions? A New Perspective to the Analysis of Sexuality in Ceausescu's Romania**

Ada Diaconu-Muresan  
Interdisciplinary PhD Program in Social Psychology  
University of Nevada, Reno

## **Introduction**

The anti-abortion regime enforced in the Socialist Republic of Romania under the rule of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu has become notorious for being one of the most repressive in history. During twenty-three of the twenty-four years when Ceausescu was president of the country (1966-1989), abortion was strictly banned and contraceptives were unavailable for the vast majority of the population. The devastating consequences of criminalizing abortion for the Romanian people (most notably, for married women) have been extensively documented after the fall of the communist regime by authors such as Baban and David (1995) or Kligman (1998). These authors have conceptualized the traumas of Romanian women as the direct and inevitable effects of the cruel state policies and some of them even warned about the likely tragic outcomes of instating similar policies in other countries, such as the United States.

Although the anti-abortion laws and their strict enforcement were undoubtedly important contributors to Romanian women's suffering and often death, the outcomes of such laws cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration people's underlying assumptions about sexuality, as a necessary condition for such effects. It is only to the extent that accepted forms of sexual expression revolve around intercourse as indispensable to 'normal' sexual activity within marriage that unwanted pregnancies become a pervasive and unavoidable problem that further leads to illegal abortion and the traumas associated with it. Therefore, in analyzing the social context of the Romanian abortion tragedy, it is necessary to explore the norms about sexuality that constructed intercourse as a hegemonic practice, despite its disastrous consequences under the given political circumstances.

Western feminist theorists with a radical orientation have challenged, on several grounds, the various discourses that support and legitimize constructions of sexuality as centered on penetration of the vagina by the penis. Among other concerns, they exposed the pervasive myths about the sexual pleasure derived by women from intercourse and argued that this practice reflects the preferences of men as a group, rather than the (genuine) desires of women. By applying this type of theoretical perspective to the analysis of the abortion tragedy in communist Romania, I propose that male definitions of sexuality need to be recognized as a central aspect in the victimization of women during that period. Therefore, I suggest that conceptualizations of the Romanian abortion problem should move beyond the liberal feminist stance of decrying the unavailability of women's reproductive rights, to a critical examination of the factors that encouraged and/or forced women to engage in intercourse, in spite of this practice being both relatively unsatisfying and extremely dangerous for them.

## **Previous Research on Abortion/Sexuality in Communist Romania and the Discourse on Reproductive Rights**

Authors that have investigated the dimensions and outcomes of reproduction control in communist Romania focused their analyses on several major themes. These themes include: the ban on abortion as a nationalist practice; the ban on abortion as a significant constraint on women's rights as equal citizens; the tragic consequences of banning abortion for women and their families. In this section I will only review findings concerning the consequences of reproduction control for women, as they are

most relevant for the present discussion, and point out the ways in which such findings have been informed by a rather limited reproductive rights perspective on women's sexuality.

Kligman (1998) has documented the various traumas experienced by reproductive-age Romanian women under the communist regime, such as the permanent threat of becoming pregnant, the pain associated with attempts at self-inducing abortions and/or seeking legal and illegal possibilities of abortion, and the general transformation of women's sexual lives into dreaded nightmares. Regarding this latter aspect, as the stories of several married women presented in Kligman's book suggest, intimacy with their husbands had become a threat in itself, due to the enormous risks it carried for women's mental and physical health. Kligman's account of this horrifying situation has emphasized the ways in which the socialist state intruded into human sexuality and reproduction and recognized that the communist person was gendered, but only to the extent that women, "by virtue of their bodies", were "the direct victims of the pronatalist policies" (p. 148). Thus, women's bodies have been viewed as "the most intimate tool used by the regime to instill their lives with terror" (p. 179). Moreover, Kligman has conceptualized the family as a source of solidarity and refuge against the intrusive state.

Although Kligman's (1998) analysis is comprehensive and addresses a wide variety of political, social, economic, legal, and psychological aspects of the abortion ban in communist Romania, it is limited in that it conceptualizes women's problems as solely determined by their lack of reproductive rights. Thus, anti-abortion legislation is assumed to generate gender inequalities, due to the nature of women's bodies and their unique capacities to reproduce. However, as I will argue later in this paper, state intrusion into the family is only one of the aspects that contributed to Romanian women's plight. As such, it needs to be understood in relation to the patriarchal social norms that defined what 'normal' marital relations were and how spouses were expected to sexually interact within the family.

Baban and David (1995) and Baban (1999) have investigated the impact of both anti-abortion policies and cultural traditions on women's experiences of sexuality and partner relations in communist Romania. Thus, in addition to discussing the impact of governmental policies on women's psychological and physical health, the authors have also acknowledged the important role of the patriarchal social system in limiting and even denying women's opportunities for sexual expression. More specifically, the virtues of women as far as sexuality was concerned were their passivity, their lack of enjoyment of sex, as well as their acceptance of sex only as part of marriage, with the purpose of reproduction and of pleasing their husbands. Baban (1999) has documented women's perceptions of sexuality during the communist regime and emphasized how "lack of contraceptives, fear of unwanted pregnancies, and the anxieties associated with an illegal abortion placed an awesome burden on couples' sexual lives" (p. 217).

Although Baban (1999) has talked about patriarchal social norms as defining appropriate expressions of sexuality and even as granting men decision-making roles in matters such as reliance on traditional birth control techniques, she has not questioned the status of intercourse as central to hegemonic definitions of sexuality. Thus, even though both governmental policies and sexist ideologies have been conceptualized as negatively affecting women's sexual experiences, the relations between patriarchy, compulsory intercourse and unwanted pregnancies have remained unchallenged. Therefore, I propose that observations such as the ones about women's envisaged passivity and lack of sexual desire could be further exploited by analyzing the extent to which these expectations helped perpetuate male understandings of sexuality as necessarily involving vaginal penetration. In the following sections, I outline a broad theoretical framework (social constructionism) that enables one to problematize the place of intercourse as a mainstream sexual practice, and a critical (feminist) analysis of intercourse as a practice that favors certain groups of people, at the expense of disadvantaging others.

### **Social Constructionist Approaches to Sexuality**

Popular understandings of human sexuality tend to reflect the view that it is naturally driven and therefore unchangeable. More specifically, males (and therefore men) are assumed to be naturally active, aggressive, and highly sexual, whereas females (and consequently women) are thought of as being innately passive and less sexual ( Jackson, 1996). Despite the pervasiveness of such understandings among lay people, critical theorists, including feminists, have challenged this narrow biological view and analyzed social structures and cultural practices as central for defining women's and men's sexuality (Seidman, 2003). Thus, according to feminist approaches, sexuality is not a natural outcome of biological forces, but rather it is socially constructed

and serves the interests of specific social categories. An important argument that suggests the validity of constructionist approaches to sexuality is provided by the documented historical and cultural variability of this phenomenon.

Jackson (1996) has distinguished between two oppositional ways in which the social construction of sexuality can be conceptualized. Proponents of the first view have postulated the existence of an innate sexual drive, which is merely modified as a result of people's socialization. Thus, men's sexuality has been viewed as the free (or even exacerbated) manifestation of males' natural sexual instinct, whereas women's sexuality has been understood as the outcome of repressing females' natural drives. This understanding of human sexuality is similar to that implied by 'cultural influence' models (Vance, 1995), given that the natural basis of sexuality – thought to be shaped by various cultural or gender-based factors – remains unquestioned.

According to the competing social constructionist perspective, there is no distinguishable innate sexual drive (whether male or female) that can exist prior to the discourses and language that create women's and men's sexuality. Thus, following the view that "what counts as erotic is itself socially constructed" (Jackson & Scott, 1996, p. 17), all components of human sexuality are assumed to be a social product. From this perspective, expectations regarding women's sexuality need to be explained in terms of "the processes of learning to fit in the current institutions, ideology and morality" (Jackson, p. 72), rather than as simply the repression exercised by a patriarchal society on an unproblematic natural drive. Moreover, the liberation of women's sexuality requires more than eliminating the constraints placed upon their presumed biological drive. Rather, it is "the lack of a language of sexual pleasure that limits women's understanding of the possibilities, leaving them without a position from which to assert their own desires" (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1996, p. 248) that must be challenged in order for women to even aspire to sexual pleasure.

Each of the above-mentioned social constructionist approaches to sexuality seems to address certain important aspects, at the expense of overlooking other significant dimensions. In the present paper, I rely upon elements pertaining to both of these approaches in addressing the issue of Romanian women's sexuality under the communist regime. More specifically, the 'cultural' view may be useful for conceptualizing the ways in which gendered expectations constrained women's sexual expression and created a climate that was unfavorable for the fulfillment of their 'true' sexual desires (as opposed to those defined from a male perspective). On the other hand, as the alternative theoretical standpoint would suggest, Romanian women were immersed in a social context in which the language about their sexual desires was largely absent, thus preventing them from even having expectations of sexual fulfillment. Unfortunately, the lack of attention to women's sexual pleasure in mainstream discourses during the communist era can also be seen as reflected in current analyses of their suffering, which fail to address the question of why women engaged in sexual practices leading to pregnancy in the first place.

### **Social Constructions of Sexuality as Intercourse**

Emblematic for the definition of sexuality from a male perspective is its ubiquitous equation with intercourse. As Holland, Ramazanoglu, Scott, Sharpe, and Thomson (1996, p. 119) have phrased it, sexual intercourse has been constructed "as men's natural pleasure, and women's natural duty." There have been proposed various explanations for this phallogocentric and constricted view of human sexuality, by attributing responsibility to social arrangements like the 'capitalist system' (Seidman, 2003) or the 'patriarchal system'. Given that men as a group tend to benefit more from such understandings of sexuality than women, gender inequality needs to be recognized as a central aspect of mainstream definitions of sexuality as intercourse, whether or not other socio-economic factors are thought to play a role in this process as well.

Feminists such as Dworkin (1987), Koedt (1996), Irigaray (1996), and Rich (1996) have challenged the various discourses that actively support and legitimize constructions of sexuality as centered on penetration of the vagina by the penis. The main areas of feminists' critique of intercourse include: culturally created associations between penetration and violence, discussions of female sexuality in terms of deviance from masculine standards, and myths about the sexual pleasure derived by women from intercourse. I will further focus on this latter critique and propose ways of including it in analyses of women's sexuality in communist Romania.

Studies on women's experiences with intercourse have typically found that this practice is not regarded as particularly pleasurable by women (see, for example, Holland, Ramazanoglu, Scott, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1996). Nevertheless, powerful

social and scientific discourses have constructed vaginal penetration as the appropriate means of sexual gratification for both men and women. Koedt (1996) has questioned this psychoanalytic invention and celebration of the 'vaginal orgasm' and argued for the acknowledgment of the 'clitoral orgasm' as the only source of pleasure for women. Similarly, Rich (1996) has described the denial of women's sexuality as one of the many instances in which men's power over women is exercised. More specifically, she has mentioned the "psychoanalytic denial of the clitoris" and "psychoanalytic doctrines of frigidity and vaginal orgasm" (p. 131) as contributing to this denial of female sexuality. Thus, the social construction of intercourse as compulsory and indispensable for women's sexuality has been vigorously attacked by feminists who have pointed out the serious limitations of this practice in terms of women's satisfaction.

### **The Proposed Framework of Analysis**

Taking into consideration the enormous risks that intercourse posed for Romanian women under Ceausescu's regime, as well as feminists' questioning of intercourse as a source of women's pleasure, the issue of why women engaged in this practice becomes one to be explored, rather than taken for granted. To the extent that expressions of sexuality are socially constructed and reflect the interests of certain groups at the expense of concealing the desires of other groups, women appear to have been victimized on several related grounds in communist Romania. On the one hand, women's sexuality was defined in terms that contributed primarily to the attainment of men's pleasure and, to a large degree, left women unsatisfied. Interviews with Romanian women conducted so far and presented in the works of Baban and David (1995), Baban (1999), and Kligman (1998) support this view that the sexual gratification derived by women from intercourse was either absent or minimal. In many cases, participants have explicitly stated that sexuality (understood as sexual intercourse) is "a male thing" (Baban, 2000, p. 242) that women have to provide to their husbands as a 'cost' of being married. On the other hand, sexual practices centered on intercourse were not only relatively unsatisfying for women, but also extremely dangerous in terms of leading to unwanted pregnancies and illegal abortions. Many women's accounts suggest that they would have preferred "abstinence" (Baban, p. 242), to the perpetual fear of becoming pregnant. Although some women actually refused sex (Puia and Hirtopeanu, 1990, cited in Baban, 1999) to avoid unwanted pregnancies, this practice was often accompanied by feelings of guilt for depriving their partners of a 'normal' sexual life. Moreover, the extent of the Romanian abortion tragedy suggests that instances of refusal, although significant in their meaning, were not widespread enough to produce substantial improvements in women's overall situation.

In light of the above discussion, I suggest that the abortion problem in Ceausescu's Romania needs to be addressed innovatively by conceptualizing male definitions of sexuality as being at the heart of women's suffering. From this perspective, the ban on abortion was imposed upon married couples in which definitions of sexuality were not equally satisfying for women and for men. Moreover, the anti-abortion laws were enacted in a social context in which normative sexual practices exposed women to a high risk of becoming pregnant. Thus, moving beyond previous understandings that have blamed primarily women's lack of reproductive rights for the illegal abortions, as well as for couples' erosion of their sexual lives, I propose that the 'malestream' equation of sexuality with intercourse prevented women not only from exploring more satisfying forms of sexual expression, but also from engaging in safer sexual practices. In this sense, changes in couples' sexual practices and the removal of intercourse from normative expressions of sexuality need not necessarily imply the degradation of people's (and especially women's) sexual lives, as authors have tended to assume so far. Rather, such transformations can potentially create the premises for more mutually satisfying and safer sexual relationships.

### **References**

Baban, A. (1999). Romania. In H. P. David (Ed.), *From abortion to contraception. A resource to public policies and reproductive behavior in Central and Eastern Europe from 1917 to the present* (pp. 191-222). London: Greenwood Press.

Baban, A. (2000). Women's sexuality and reproductive behavior in post-Ceausescu Romania: a psychological approach. In S. Gal & G. Kligman (Eds.), *Reproducing gender. Politics, publics, and everyday life under socialism* (pp. 225-256). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Baban, A., & David, H. P. (1995). Voices of Romanian women: perceptions of sexuality, reproductive behavior, and partner relations during the Ceausescu era. In S. Zeidenstein & K. Moore (Eds.), *Learning about sexuality: a practical beginning*

(pp. 19-31). New York: Population Council and International Women's Health Coalition.

Dworkin, A. (1987). *Intercourse*. New York: Free Press.

Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., Scott, S., Sharpe, S., & Thomson, R. (1996). "Don't die of ignorance." I nearly died of embarrassment': Condoms in context (pp. 117-129). In S. Jackson & S. Scott (Eds.), *Feminism and sexuality. A reader*. (pp. 62-73). New York: Columbia University Press.

Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, S., Sharpe, S., & Thomson, R. (1996). Pressured pleasure: young women and the negotiation of sexual boundaries. In S. Jackson & S. Scott (Eds.), *Feminism and sexuality. A reader*. (pp. 248-262). New York: Columbia University Press.

Jackson, S. (1996) The social construction of female sexuality. In S. Jackson & S. Scott (Eds.), *Feminism and sexuality. A reader*. (pp. 62-73). New York: Columbia University Press.

Kligman, G. (1998). *The politics of duplicity. Controlling reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Koedt, A. (1996). The myth of the vaginal orgasm. In S. Jackson & S. Scott (Eds.), *Feminism and sexuality. A reader*. (pp. 111-116). New York: Columbia University Press.

Irigaray, L. (1996). This sex which is not one. In S. Jackson & S. Scott (Eds.), *Feminism and sexuality. A reader*. (pp. 79-83). New York: Columbia University Press.

Scott, S., & Jackson, S. (1996). Sexual skirmishes and feminist factions: twenty-five years of debate on women and sexuality. In S. Jackson & S. Scott (Eds.), *Feminism and sexuality. A reader*. (pp. 62-73). New York: Columbia University Press.

Seidman, S. (2003). *The social construction of sexuality*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Vance, C. S. (1995). Social construction theory and sexuality. In M. Berger, B. Wallis, & S. Watson (Eds.), *Constructing masculinity* (pp. 37-48). New York: Routledge.

[Return to program page](#)

[Return to Front Page](#)