

The SDG has unfinished business with regards to women: experiences from Asia and Eastern Europe

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Minodora Sălcudean and Charity Lee talk during a meeting of the Project 'SDGs in Journalism Reporting'

NOTAS BIOGRÁFICAS

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If the gender equality gap is not overcome, the Sustainable Development Goals will be, only, utopian horizons. And not only because equality and empowerment of women and girls is one of the explicit objectives of SDGs, but also because it is difficult to achieve goals as a quality education or health, or the end of poverty, for example, if it takes into account that women have been systematically left out. Precisely from their experience as women on the margins –Romania, in Eastern Europe, and Malaysia on the Asian continent– speak professors Minodora Sălcudean and Charity Lee. From the RICD we invite them to dialogue during their presence in the implementation of the project ‘SDG’s in Journalism Reporting’, the past February in Santiago de Compostela. An initiative in which 6 countries from Europe and Asia participate, and which aims to train journalism professionals committed to complying with the SDG’s. Sălcudean and Lee spoke more from their experience as women than from the theory and they showed the character transversal of andro-hetero-sexism and its ability to adapt to diverse cultures and contexts. So far away and the time so close.

- What is it like to be a woman in Malaysia? What is it like to be a woman in Rumania?

Charity Lee (University of Malaya): I think the word “woman” is obviously very subjective, right? And Malaysia is a diverse country. You have the majority group, which is the Malays, who are Muslim, and then you have some other minority groups. I am of Chinese heritage. My great-grandfather and parents came from China like over a hundred years ago. Then you have people who came from Indian heritage and you have a lot of aborigine groups as well. So, within each culture and subcultures you have very different definition of what it is to be a woman. And, of course, now, in our Modern age, Malaysia is developing very fast and is becoming more westernized. In the urban areas there is also a lot of western culture coming into. So, for me, there’s still a lot of freedom for women in Malaysia. Because of the diversity of the country, there’s a lot of possibilities for you to determine

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subjectivities or different kinds of ways of being a woman. I think that’s interesting for us being Asian and having these multicultural backgrounds.

Minodora Sălcudean (Universitatea Lucian Blaga din Sibiu): From my point of view, to be a woman in Rumania is a great thing (laughs). It’s

awesome. But, from the point of view of many women, for instance, in the rural area in Rumania, is not so good. Because we have to make a difference between the urban women and the women who live in the rural part. There is a patriarchal mentality, unfortunately, so the women in those areas have some problems with domestic violence, inequality, discrimination... But I work in the academic space, it’s a very great kind of living. I interact with educated people, with open-minded people... We have a lot of freedom in Romania, of course. It’s a democratic country. But the main problem in our country is the mentality.

In a patriarchal society, women have to cook, and to stay in the house, and to ask for permission to go out. But this kind of thing is happening only in some isolated villages.

Romania developed in 30 years from the fall of the Communism, with a lot of opportunities for women. So, it is great for me, for my friends, for my colleagues, for my neighbours... But I live in a city, not in a village.

CL: In Malaysia, in the urban areas the women are a bit more free. In the villages there’s also a lot of problems. Even very rural aborigine, like native groups, women are much less educated. I think generally Asian cultures are very patriarchal like in the Chinese culture, that is coming back from China 200 years ago. Only the males can inherit property and land, and the Chinese surname. The family name, is very important. For you to carry on your family name you need a boy, a son. They were killing the girls because they wanted to retain a family name. So that kind of thinking has unfortunately also come with the migrants that came to Malaysia. For example, I’m a mother, I have a baby. And when everybody

asked me “oh, is it your child going to be a boy or a girl?”, and then I said “it’s a boy”, they were like “oh! it’s so wonderful!”. What’s wrong? If it was a girl it’d be wonderful too. And I live in a city and these are city people saying this to me.



Minodora Sălcudean

- How are European women seen in Malaysia? How are the Asian women seen in Romania? And in media?

CL: It’s not just Malaysia. In a lot of Asian countries (Japanese, Korean...), the idea of beauty in a woman it’s still very narrow. You have to be slim, you have to have very fair skin... That’s just the idea. And it’s perpetuated by the media. In shampoo ads or anything with women they have long straight hair and they are fair, and somehow they don’t look very Asian. They look a bit European, with big eyes, and specially being thin. We don’t see different versions of women as much on screen among our actors or TV movies. Even in newspapers.

MS: What kind of media share this kind of iconic image?

CL: When I was a teenager, I was approached by some “talents” to go and do commercials, and they asked me to go for audition for commercials. But then, when we go into that room, they’ll sit and tell me all the things that were wrong with me: “Oh, you don’t look so nice on the side”, “Oh, you look a bit, you know, European, but not as much as it could be”. There’s some idea of what the women should look like. And I think today I still see the same kind of representation.

MS: When I saw this question, I thought: “It’s a trap?”. Because we cannot talk about Asian women. There are many different countries and cultures and places and religions in Asia. And maybe the “Asian women” —syntagma it’s not

correct but I use it— are thin and beautiful and exotic and polite, kind and calm...

CL: But I think there is a kind of perception in Asia as well about European women or western women tend to be more free and maybe a bit more open and less submissive.

MS: Independent.

CL: Some people view that as a positive, but then there are some more maybe religious women who might say “that’s not so good”. That they are too independent and it’s not “proper” for a woman to behave like that. Especially when it comes to dressing.

MS: I think European have a kind of fascination about Asia, about countries from far Asia like Thailand or Malaysia or Cambodia. So, we construct some images about the women and the people from there, and media of course perpetuate these stereotypes.

- What goals of the proposals by SDG 5 do you consider most important for your respective countries? What are the difficulties to make them a reality?

CL: Malaysia is currently one of the twenty-five countries in the world that deny women the right to confer nationality to their children on equal basis as men. Only 20% of women hold senior roles in the workforce, compared to 79% of men. And we only have 14% of Malaysian women who hold office in Parliament. And even though the government is doing a lot of things, there’s no trickle-down effect yet.

Sexual harassment is also quite widespread and quite accepted in offices. I personally know friends of mine who work in work environments where sexual harassment is common. Nobody thinks anything about it. The management does not actively do anything to reduce it. On the streets as well. I’m quite used to being catcalled in certain parts of the city. They will say certain things, or whistle or whatever. So much so that in certain areas of the city there are “pink zones”, certain sections of the train or in taxis only designated for women. But I do not see that actually solving it. All you do is give protection for the women from people who harass you. You’re not doing anything about reducing sexual harassment in general. So, there’re definitely a lot of room for improvement in Malaysia. And then there’s not even to mention female circumcision which still happen among the Muslims. And it’s not illegal to do that.

MS: First of all, I have to tell you that I'm not a gender equality expert, so I will talk only from my experience and my observations. What's happened in the Romanian society? I think that the most important problem related to the issue is domestic violence in Romania: violence against women in the rural area, but not only. We cannot generalize this topic. And maybe the access to the politics top levels. It's very hard for women in Rumania to become a top politician, and media treat them with sarcasm. This happened with the ex prime minister. She's a woman, and in media appeared a lot of pseudo information, opinion, about the hair, about the dresses...

and they don't want to agree. So I think that calls for the maternity.



Charity Lee

CL: Which would never do with men, right?

MS: Yes, but I think this happens in many countries. But the violence against women is the main problem related to the issue. We have many cases about teenagers that are included in traffic, in prostitution, for abroad Romania, for other countries from Europe. There are many poor families in the rural area in Romania and some girls think they don't have any opportunity to develop a career. Maybe sometimes they are naïve, and they become easy victims. It is a problem: prostitution, infantile prostitution... and domestic violence. These are the main problems. I think Romania is on the first place in Europe as a percentage of teenager mothers.

- The Beijing Platform for Action, at the Fourth World Conference of Women in 1995, spoke of the urgency of eliminating stereotyped and negative representations of women in the media. Do you think that progress was made in achieving this goal in your countries?

CL: I don't think so, honestly. I mean, I think it's better. The progress is slow, though. I still see the same kind of images of women in the media generally. And it's not even media. I think it's everywhere that people expect women to look a certain way.

CL: Why?

MS: Because of lack of sexual education, I think. There are local, small communities where mothers of daughters are taught to marry earlier. And they don't talk with their daughters about kind of taboo topics.

MS: How could we eliminate the stereotypes and the negative image of women in media? Not to deny, not to forbid, not to ban some kind of TV shows, but only with media education. I think when we talk about media, we often think about advertising... and there is a problem. When we talk about media, we talk about journalism too, and in professional journalism the things are getting better. We have 51% of women in Romania, and a lot of women in media appear. There are PR journalists. In schools of journalism and communication, there are many women than boys in the last decade. We always say the domain is feminized.

CL: Teen pregnancies. It's among certain communities only. I think it's quite high among the Malay community, the Muslim community, partly because anything to do with is very taboo. One of the side problems that comes out of that is actually we got a high rate of abandoned babies.

MS: So the lack of sexual education is the cause.

- And in Malaysia?

CL: It's so taboo that people just don't talk about it. You can't be seemed to have a boyfriend or have a relationship and then if you're pregnant that's the worst thing that could happen to you.

MS: In Romania it's a big discussion between church and civil society about sex education in schools, because the church doesn't like to talk about... They're very traditional, conservative,

CL: I don't know the figures, but I see equal amounts of newscasters, for example. I think it's quite equally distributed. Of course, we don't have many women ministers, so when is reporting politics, you will see just men, mostly. We also have about half-half female-male population.

- *And women as protagonists or sources of the news?*

CL: I do remember a few instances where the female was singled out. Whether she was the perpetrator or the victim, you know? "Oh, her voice is so high-pitched, she was so angry", you know? And picking on her appearance. I think it's a lot easier for the women to receive those kinds of comments. But not always.

MS: We have activists and people who are interested in this topic, now. This kind of women, that are very empowered and very present in social media, in media, in the academic field. And it seemed to me that feminism become important topic for Romanian society.

CL: I think, generally, more and more Malaysia become more developed it's also becoming more westernized. So then, the ideas of liberty for women is increasing as well and feminism is on the rise. Within our majority community, the Muslims, there are also NGOs and activists. Some of them are researchers and scholars themselves. "Sisters in Islam" is a feminist progressive Muslim group that promotes that if you have the correct interpretation of the Quran you can find ways of being free in Islam, and to live as a good Muslim, but at the same time not being dominated by the men. There are these progressive ideas. And "Sisters in Islam", of course, receive a lot of criticism from the fundamentalist groups and also the more conservative sections of the Muslim population.

- *The manifesto Feminism for 99%, defends feminism for all women, beyond white and western women in positions of power. What is the importance of this feminism for 99% of women in your countries? Do you perceive clashes between the different ways of conceiving feminism?*

MS: In Malaysia, I think, the differences come from religion's perspective. In Romania, the differences come from religion too but there is also a gap between urban communities and the rural communities. Because rural communities

are more traditional. If people would know how many rights we gained during the History due to feminism movement, they will be more open. But they don't know this.

CL: On one hand you have the Muslim perspective and very traditional Chinese or even Indian communities which are very patriarchal. So it's common that the woman is expected to be the one to care for the children, not going to be the breadwinner maybe. And then you have more westernized influences coming in. Like my family is very westernized so, we believe that women go and work. I did a PhD. But... It's very subtle but you still see the clashes between like "oh, why did you let your wife go and she's out of the house a lot". You might be perceived as a bad mother because you rather be working or doing so many things rather than staying home. What kind of father take care of their child, right? I do see it as a kind of West and maybe more conservative Asian cultures that are clashing.

MS: I noticed another kind of perception, related to feminism, on social media. There are many women, and men too, that ironized and speak with sarcasm about feminist movement. When an event that involves women takes place, social media generate a lot of comments about that woman, who is, what she's doing, what her dress is. Especially when we talk about feminist women, very known.

- *One last question, How are gender studies valued in your countries?*

CL: I think, as a discipline in Malaysia, not really high value at the moment.

MS: Depends on the approach, on the perspective, on the target. In the academic field they are very well-known and people are very open and they understand the necessity of this kind of studies. But when we talk about common people again, they ironize or took these things with sarcasm (laughs). This is the way they are valued in Romania.

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Transcription: Cecilia Nóvoa.