

NEGOTIATING MODERNITY: STATE MEDICINE AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Klejd Këllici, PhD

Associate Professor

University of Tirana – Albania

Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Political Sciences

[k.kellici@gmail.com], OCRID: 0000-0001-8877-3590

Hygiene Campaigns and State Penetration in the Sixties in Socialist Albania

Abstract: *This paper discusses hygiene campaigns in socialist Albania from the early 1960s up to 1970. During this period, communist authorities undertook a series of hygiene campaigns aimed at improving the living conditions of the population, especially in rural areas. These campaigns were directed by state agencies and carried out in schools, factories, and public spaces. Their principal aim was education and the prevention to health hazards, particularly during a time marked by increased urbanization, industrialization, and collectivization. This paper employs the theoretical concept of state penetration, understood here as the state's capacity to brake and reform traditional or resilient forms of premodern organization. In the Albanian case, the authorities pursued a series of reforms aimed at breaking and reforming the family structure to align with broader efforts of industrialization and modernizations.*

In addition to state agencies, other organizations were tasked with implementing such campaigns – most notably the Union of Albanian Women (Bashkimi i Grave të Shqipërisë). This article focuses in particular on the methods used by U.A.W.'s local chapters and women activists to conduct hygiene campaigns. Focusing on the organization's role in these efforts reveals a wide range of instruments the state deployed to penetrate and shape women's lives, as well as the intimate space of the home.

Keywords: *hygiene; state penetration; women; emancipation.*

Introduction

As a young child attending elementary school in mid-1980s socialist Albania, I, like my peers, was subject to strict discipline enforced by our (mostly) female teachers. Every week, usually on Mondays, we were required to place our hands on the desk for inspection. The teacher

would calmly walk between the rows, checking each student to ensure their nails were clipped, their hands were clean, and that they had a clean handkerchief. Occasionally, she would also inspect our hair for lice. If lice were found, the student was sent home to undergo a rather unpleasant purification process. First, the hair was treated with kerosene, then meticulously combed with a fine-toothed comb. In the best-case scenario, when available, a locally produced anti-lice shampoo was used instead.

Personal hygiene came under public scrutiny, children became its focus, and schools served as the stage where this control was enacted. A clean child was seen as a reflection of the household's condition and the housewife's efficiency, particularly in the eyes of the broader public. At school, the child was monitored by the teacher – an authority figure who, often being a woman herself, was attuned to both public expectations and private norms of hygiene. In this dual role, she represented both state authority and maternal sensibility. Women, in general, were primary targets of state intervention, (Stark, 2007: 98) as the state relied on their traditional association with the household and child-rearing to implement its social and hygiene policies. Personal hygiene and cleanliness were not merely matters of individual or societal well-being; they constituted a political stance that shaped every aspect of an individual's life, both within the family and in public spaces. Through the promotion and enforcement of hygienic practices, the communist regime drew a clear boundary between the past and the present – between backwardness and ignorance on the one hand, and progress and modernity on the other.

This modernizing and transformative logic of the state had entered Albania with the establishment of the modern state under Zog, was reinforced during the Italian occupation, and consolidated during state socialism. In the early 1920s, with the help of the International Red Cross, the Albanian state began to develop its sanitary infrastructure. Especially during the 1930s, (Brisku, 2023) efforts focused on providing basic healthcare services, particularly in urban areas. Major initiatives included the prevention of infectious diseases through vaccination campaigns. During the Italian occupation, a significant part of the health-related efforts was undertaken by the Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia (ONMI), one of the welfare institutions through which fascism tried to replicate the penetration of the intimate life of women and children in Italy (AQSH, F. 164, V. 1943, Dos. 17, Fl. 2).

Hygiene campaigns were common in the early years of communism. From 1945 onward, the regime sought to promote hygiene and basic personal care, particularly among pregnant women and young mothers. In the absence of adequate healthcare institutions and sufficient medical personnel, the state often relied on the Union of Albanian Women (U.A.W.) and its local chapters to promote basic hygiene practices.

Although the regime's primary policy objective was the emancipation of women – especially through their integration into the workforce – post-war Albania remained an extremely underdeveloped country. As a result, the efforts of the U.A.W. also focused on eradicating illiteracy among women and providing child-rearing education for young mothers (AQSH, F.723, V. 1947, Dos. 4, Fl. 15). Driven in part by the interest of young mothers themselves, the U.A.W. promoted several initiatives focused on education and basic practices of hygiene and childcare. These efforts were aligned with broader state policies aimed at achieving the ultimate goal of women's emancipation, which was to be realized primarily through full employment. In the early 1960s, due in part to the gradual increase in state investment and industrialization, there was a growing need to expand the presence of women in the workforce. Consequently, attracting women to the labor force became the principal objective of the Union of Albanian Women (U.A.W.), alongside its hygiene campaigns.

The demand for workers, rising levels of education, and state-led labor initiatives significantly increased women's mobility. This made it both necessary and feasible to promote hygiene standards through campaigns focused on bodily care. The standardization of such practices had a dual impact: it not only improved the well-being of women themselves but also enabled them to act as agents of transformation by disseminating these practices within their communities of origin.

Hygiene was promoted and enforced through coordinated campaigns directed by the Central Committee of the Party. These directives were implemented in parallel by public health agencies and mass organizations such as the Union of Albanian Women (U.A.W.), ensuring influence across both institutional and grassroots levels (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1963, Dos. 107, Fl. 28). The latter played a pivotal role in supervision, in mobilizing activists, and in disseminating the so called "new/modern way of life". The purpose of this article is to assess the role of the U.A.W. in facilitating and conducting propaganda cam-

paings targeted at women, who were portrayed in various roles throughout different periods as mothers, housewives, and workers. Propaganda and hygiene campaigns primarily targeted children, working mothers, and housewives. Because the regime lacked the capacity to extend the network of health institutions, the U.A.W., through its agents and volunteers, promoted and advocated hygiene norms from the late 1940s onward. Efforts doubled those of the state, thus enforcing the idea and the presence of the Party, through its controlled organizations such as the U.A.W. On one side, state authorities such as the Ministry of Health and its various local agencies would work especially on vaccination campaigns, the construction of infrastructure, or dissemination of information about various epidemics, while on the other the U.A.W., would enforce such policies by monitoring their implementation, overseeing sanitary structures and supervising households (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1946, Dos. 15, Fl. 76). These campaigns primarily targeted women's bodies – particularly in their roles as mothers. Through women, the state extended its reach into the household and the family, and ultimately workplace. By regulating aspects such as women's personal hygiene, childbirth, child-rearing, and household organization, the state effectively penetrated and asserted control over private life.

In the last decade a few books authored by Albanian scholars have begun to shed light on the structure and society-state relations during the dictatorship. These works briefly mention the role of state structures in enforcing top-down hygiene policies which led to widespread societal transformation (Mëhilli, 2015; Lelaj, 2015; A. Hoxha, 2023). While literature on women's emancipation and gender relations is relatively abundant, (Papa-Pandelejmoni and Kera, 2013; Ikonimi and Woodcock, 2014; Këlliçi and Danaj, 2016, 2023, 2024) it often overlooks the role of the Women's Union (U.A.W.) in implementing state policies concerning hygiene, women's education, and the oversight of health institutions. Although hygiene campaigns had a broader public scope, they primarily aimed to transform the lives of women and children, improve the living conditions of the family as a whole, thus also reshaping gender relations. By intervening in the private sphere, the state actively reorganized the domestic space of the socialist household (Verdery, 1996: 65; Massino, 2019: 63).

Healthcare was a major concern in post-war Albania. The communist regime, established in 1944, aimed to fulfil its wartime promises of improving living standards and uplifting marginalized classes such as peasants and workers. Admittedly, the pre-war healthcare system

was rudimentary. Despite the existence of a state hospital in Tirana and a few smaller ones in other cities, rural areas lacked access to healthcare (Brisku, 2023). Basic hygiene, living conditions, and amenities like clean water and sewage systems varied greatly depending on local circumstances and traditions, and remained largely unchanged in some regions and rudimentary in others. The U.A.W. built a relatively strong network from the late 1940s onwards and assisted the state in establishing basic sanitary control over the population, especially in rural areas. Although focused on women and their emancipation, the organization perpetuated certain entrenched ideas about women's roles in society. A 1965 report described women as "by nature, being a heart caring housewife, who knows how to manage (the household), and sacrifice more than anyone" (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1965, Dos. 75, Fl. 19). It was no coincidence that in totalitarian regimes, motherhood was conceived not simply in terms of procreation, but as a fundamental duty, through which maternal love could instill essential social and political values in the young (Balmas Neary, 1999; Hofman, 2000: 36). Although hygiene campaigns had a broader public scope, their main purpose was to improve the lives of women and children and the family as a whole – thus reshaping gender relations and reorganizing the private domain of the socialist household.

Women were thus recognized as key agents of social and political transformation and made central to the implementation of change. Since child rearing and household management were seen as women's exclusive domain, any policy concerning children or living standards had to be channeled through them. The state placed strong emphasis on childbirth and infant survival, actively pursuing policies to reduce premature deaths and safeguard the health of future citizens. Following Party directives, women were also expected to educate their children and instill in them official socialist values. To do so, they had to adopt a new lifestyle – one that aligned with the ideals of the socialist state. Embracing what was defined as modern or representative of the new socialist way of life often involved visible bodily changes and the adoption of new habits. Women were expected to introduce these practices within their households and to serve as personal examples within their communities, thereby reinforcing and spreading the new norms through everyday behavior. Once personal hygiene and bodily care were internalized by women as daily habits, these practices were gradually extended to other members of the household. Children were the first to be targeted, particularly with regard to bodily cleanliness, the regular use of soap, and

general grooming. Attention then expanded to encompass domestic hygiene: the cleanliness of the home, the washing of clothes, the preparation of nutritious meals – which required women to learn and cook new dishes – and the overall maintenance of the household environment (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1966, Dos. 6, Fl. 169).

Meanwhile, during the late 1950s and mid-1960s, the U.A.W. also focused on integrating women into the workforce. In urban areas, this often meant replacing men with women in sectors such as services, preschool and primary education, and the primary healthcare system. In rural areas, women's integration typically meant working in agriculture, reflecting both the economic needs of the countryside and the broader gendered division of labor promoted by the state (Këlliçi and Danaj, 2016). By the mid-1960s, the U.A.W. conducted several campaigns aimed at the full integration of women into the workforce, particularly in the context of full collectivization which was completed by 1966 (Lelaj and Bardhoshi, 2023). Moreover, the organization launched initiatives to eliminate so called 'old habits and manners', following Enver Hoxha's call for a revolutionarization of life (E. Hoxha, 1968), mimicking the Chinese cultural revolution campaigns (Marku, 2017) which culminated with the banning of religion in Albania in 1967.

Such campaigns aimed to further and extend modernization across the country – a planned modernization through which the state expanded control over the means of production, integrated local economies into the national one, and rendered the countryside dependent on the state (Lelaj, 2015: 121). Women were made dependent – encouraged or forced to rely on state agencies for childbirth, primary care, children's health. By this logic, the state assumed, or claimed to assume, part of the family's responsibility for childcare, thereby intruding, controlling and standardizing basic child-rearing practices (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1946, Dos. 42, Fl. 21).

Following this intrusion came intervention in the household, where, through the responsibilities of childcare and with the help of U.A.W. activists, women introduced new spatial arrangements and domestic norms. Women also had to be drawn into the workforce, either voluntarily or under institutional pressure. In the countryside, however, collectivization redefined family relations, leading to the demise of patriarchal family structures. The new, nuclear family was expected to comply with new socialist norms of hygiene, cleanliness, presentation and household reorganization. By the end of the 1960s, at least at a Party level, the circle was closed.

Hygiene, which from the late 1940s to the late 1960s was a matter of transforming private life, became from the 1970s onward, a means of managing public space. It was not only about preventing disease outbreaks, but about disciplining behaviour and introducing a new way of life. New institutions and practices radically reshaped the perception of everyday experience (Szpak, 2023).

The challenges were formidable, given the extreme underdevelopment of Albania's rural areas. The economy remained heavily reliant on agriculture, even as the post-war communist plans promised rapid industrialization and sweeping improvements in living and material conditions (A. Hoxha, 2023: 6). The countryside was thus the key focus: first for integration into the national economy; second, for food production; and third, for supplying labor to the Party's projects of transformation. This penetration would have been impossible outside the logic of building state socialism: collectivization, emancipation and industrialization. Despite many obstacles, the regime was proud of its healthcare achievements. By 1967 the State/Party claimed major progress compared to the pre-war period. Since 1944, the number of doctors increased had from 1 in 8527 inhabitants to 1 in 1430, and life expectancy had increased from 38 to 68 years – almost on par with other European countries (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1969, Dos. 46, Fl. 70).

“Warriors of the New” (Way of Life)

Although most of the U.A.W.'s efforts tackled childcare or domestic responsibilities, personal hygiene was not neglected. In this area too, activists were expected to lead by example. A 1967 guideline described hygiene as “... a condition to secure a cultured life in the village”, and issued detailed instructions on how to address the issue, especially among women (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1967, Dos. 53, Fl. 13). Hygiene was perceived as a multidimensional process encompassing bodily care, domestic cleanliness, and childcare. Women were expected to adopt new hygiene habits and instill them in other family members, transforming both routines and household space. The rules laid out by the document reflected the increased mobility of women, as they moved from the home to schools, factories and dormitories. As one of the main problems of hygiene was lice, activists were asked to cut their hair short – both for hygienic reasons and as a symbolic break with tradition. Long hair was traditionally a sign that a woman was unmarried. U.A.W. activists therefore almost always wore short hair as a marker of hygiene

and modernity. The new Albanian woman was, in many ways, both different from and more ‘modern’ than her Western counterpart. In Albania, modernity was expressed through practicality: trousers and short hair suited women who worked, replaced men, or performed the same jobs as men. This form of modernity stood in contrast – if not outright opposition – to the wave of cultural and social changes that women experienced in Western Europe during the 1960s.

Returning to personal hygiene, the 1967 guidelines outlined a “method of work” for the campaign. Activists were expected to check each other for lice and then submit to the control of the local head of the U.A.W. branch. Women activists were required to clean parts of the body daily and wash fully on weekends, establishing Saturday body-washing as a ritual in nearly every Albanian household.

In urban areas, washing was facilitated by newly built single-family apartments with indoor bathroom. In rural areas washing had to be improvised in so called “*banjas*” or public baths. Although the Albanian public was familiar with the concept of a public bath, due to the Ottoman heritage and the persistence of such structures in urban areas (Castiglia and Bevilaqua, 2008) the collective socialist public baths were a totally different, in terms of modernity, practicality and access, especially in rural areas. In Nivicë, a small mountain village in Southern Albania, a local teacher and U.A.W. member had to demonstratively bathe herself and then bring her pupils to do the same to convince other women to follow (AQSH, F. 723, Dos. 46, V. 1969, Fl. 70). These actions targeted not just children, but their parents, especially mothers. Teachers were expected to monitor and enforce hygiene by assessing how parents cared for their children.

Control extended to underwear, which was largely absent in rural areas, and introduced via propaganda, especially in working places. Since it was difficult to discuss intimate clothing publicly, propaganda avoided direct references to underpants and instead promoted replacing unsuitable traditional garments with new, more practical ones. New garments made of lighter fabrics, produced locally by the Tirana *Stalin* Plant or *Mao Ce Dun* Plant in Berat, were promoted in contrast to older woolen clothing. This clothing shift had both political and practical functions: it signaled acceptance of new norms and allowed for freer movement – particularly for working women. Above all, it introduced new hygiene norms. Traditional clothes were unhygienic, difficult to clean and take care of, and often handmade. They were gradually

pushed to the realm of folklore culture, worn only during special occasions.

On the topic of intimate body care, U.A.W. activists were instructed to carry two pairs of underwear and two small pieces of “hygienic cotton cloth” – the latter likely serving as a makeshift menstrual pad. In a still deeply traditional society where menstruation was rarely discussed – even in practical guidelines on women’s health – Albanian women were often left to improvise sanitary solutions on their own.

Demonstrative actions, top-down interventions, and regular inspections formed one part of the state’s efforts to reshape rural lifestyles. However, meaningful change from above was also expected to be reinforced from below. Women and youth were the primary targets of these transformative efforts. At various times, they were called upon to voluntarily participate in construction projects, symbolizing their role in both the physical and ideological building of socialism. Thousands of youngsters, women and men alike were mobilized in the late forties onward to build railways, roads, plant trees and so on. *Aksioni* (action, voluntary work), progressively became *rite de passage* (Tomka, 1982) for every Albanian youngster above 15 years old (Zëri i Rinisë, 1967: 1). Initially following the Yugoslav model, (Bakovic, 2015) and later the Soviet Stakhanovite movement (Siegelbaum, 1988: 1), forcing youngsters into voluntary work provided cheap labor and acted as a form of mass education (Mëhilli, 2015: 111) and internal migration from rural to urban areas, especially for youngsters and women.

A 1968 propaganda film, “*Përse bie kjo daulle/Why Is this Drum Beating*”, depicts changes occurring during the period of industrialization. The plot revolves around the encounter and love story of two youngsters in a factory building site (Williams, 2023: 178). The girl comes from North Albania while the boy, a seasoned worker comes from the city. She is a volunteer worker who undergoes a radical personal transformation during her time at the construction site. The young girl recalls her first encounter with the camp: she arrives as part of a larger group of young women, all volunteers like herself, dressed in traditional clothing and extremely shy. Their unease grows as they encounter female volunteers in trousers, T-shirts, and cropped hair, with a foulard covering their heads. These garments are both practical for labor and reflective of modern ideals. Soon after their arrival, two U.A.W. activists approach the new arrivals and invite them to wash in the shower cabins. Though some resist at first, one girl steps forward, and the others follow.

Once bathed they shed their heavy clothes and emerge fresh and changed. Modernized and cleansed women were expected to return to their villages and spread new living standards. Their old clothes disappear, never to be worn again. Having undergone a profound transformation, they were now tasked with transforming their places of origin. Labeled “warriors of the new”, these women, mobilized by the U.A.W., were expected to act in loco as agents of change. By 1967, Party directives had designated the household as the primary focus of modernization. Hygiene was the standard by which transformation would be judged. In Lezhë, many returning volunteers were recruited by the U.A.W. to modernize their family homes. They were expected both to reorganize their living space to inspect others’ households (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1969, Dos. 48, Fl. 220).

Groups of three or more women would take responsibility for a set of households to visit on a regular basis, giving advice and often assisting with chores. Local teachers and/or medical staff often participated in these visits, giving advice or criticism. This form of sociality was judged to be invasive but necessary. It appealed to women’s sense of responsibility and shame regarding the care of their homes and children.

The U.A.W. could not enforce specific behaviors, but it worked to establish a shared understanding: that norms of hygiene and household organization should be evaluated not politically, but socially, that is, the political principle had to become a social norm. These inspections generated examples – both positive and negative – that were discussed and judged collectively. This contributed to what Nicole Nixon calls familial shame in the Albanian context (Nixon, 2009: 2). Because household standards were enforced through women, both good and bad examples were feminized, and women’s activities came under scrutiny, both politically and socially.

Women and Child: Hygiene, and Mother’s Care

To implement these policies, the State and the Party needed to exert their influence to achieve their transformative goals. Hygiene was central to this strategy and depended on the collaboration of all state agents active in the territory. While state presence needed to be gradually built, the presence of U.A.W. was easier to establish. The organization boasted an impressive semi-compulsory membership of 200,000 women. From the 1950s onward, it included the wives of Politburo members and other party officials. While this detail may seem minor, it

reveals the Party's control over the organization – its scope and activities. The U.A.W.'s 1946 statute committed it to elevating women's status in socialist society, guiding them toward emancipation and providing a range of support services such as nurseries, kindergartens, and social restaurants (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1950, Dos. 1, Fl. 155). While many of these tasks were shaped by policymakers, local Party officials or state bureaucrats, the organization itself became highly effective at managing propaganda and control. Over the years, U.A.W. organized a wide array of educational conferences, largely targeting women (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1950, Dos. 11, Fl. 17).

Education focused first on eradicating illiteracy, which was widespread among rural women, and second on courses on childcare. While women's roles expanded over time, their primary duty remained motherhood. No matter how progressive the agenda of emancipation became, childbearing continued to legitimize women's role in Albanian society. In public discourse, women were depicted as mothers or future mothers. Even the prospective of young women working was framed through their presumed roles as mothers (Danaj and Këlliçi, 2024). Through U.A.W., the state worked to redefine motherhood – bearing children was presented as a public rather than a private affair. (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1946, Dos. 42, Fl. 21). Propaganda campaigns targeted young mothers, appealing to them, or emotionally pressuring them, through the idea of unconditional love for their children. If love was truly unconditional, then the state should be trusted to have the superior knowledge of raising their offspring. As a result, childcare courses grew popular, especially in areas with high rates of infant mortality. Control over child/women-focused health institutions, allowed the state to disseminate childcare norms, while asserting tutelage over motherhood.

From the late 1940s, propaganda around motherhood sought to detach mothers or mothers to be from their family culture. U.A.W. discourse cast older women as wicked and ignorant elders, incapable of understanding science or modernity and thus life (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1948, Dos. 50, Fl. 39). This messaging found fertile ground in a country with high birth rates but alarming child mortality rates. Nearly half of children aged one to five died either shortly after birth or due to ignorance, lack of medical care, or refusal to seek it (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1965, Dos. 76, Fl. 93). This was especially true in remote rural areas, where women relied on traditional knowledge for childbirth. In the early postwar years through the early 1960s, the village was a site of backwardness and ignorance, sustained by “religion, superstition and

reliance on elderly women” (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1968, Dos. 118, Fl. 13). In the later years of socialism, and especially after 1967 – Albania’s own version of cultural revolution – rural areas were depicted as a socialist heaven. Despite being a mostly agricultural society, Albania’s rural landscape remained varied. An U.A.W. report divided the countryside into three broad subregions: north, centre and south, each exhibiting different cultural and hygienic conditions.

The north for example suffered from geographic isolation and minimal state penetration. U.A.W. activists attributed the north’s backwardness to the influence of religion, especially Catholicism (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1968, Dos. 118, Fl. 13), even though not all inhabitants were Catholic. Identifying religion as the main cause of backwardness came at a time when religious institutions were gradually being dismantled (Pandelejmoni, 2011; Giakoumis and Premović, 2022). Central Albania’s backwardness, by contrast, was seen as rooted in social norms and conservatism. Southern Albania was seen more positively, as an area where hygiene, both personal and domestic, had become more embedded due to modernization and proximity to urban areas. Thus, hygiene campaigns targeted more intensely the northern part of Albania.

In parallel, propaganda identified childbearing and childcare as the main problem in rural Albania. Pregnant women would never see a doctor or a midwife and gave birth at home (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1963, Dos. 107, Fl. 28). In 1967, more than 38,9% of women gave birth without any medical supervision; in some areas that figure reached 70 % (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1969, Dos. 46, Fl. 59). Child birth was typically overseen by the eldest women of extended households. Nearly 30 % of children died within the first five years of life, and 92 % of these deaths occurred without the child ever having been examined by a doctor. Even in relatively developed regions, like Vlorë (South Albania), the situation was dire: nearly half of all children died without being diagnosis or identified cause of death (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1965, Dos. 76, Fl. 80).

In many remote rural areas, women gave birth without qualified assistance. Although the state began to introduce healthcare infrastructure, uptake was slow. Ignorance of basic norms of hygiene was alarming. In mountainous regions, for example, umbilical cords were sometimes cut with the same scissors used for shearing sheep, significantly increasing the risk of infection. Child nutrition was another concern. Breastfeeding often continued to age three, after which children were fed diets consisting of bread, dairy brine and pickled vegetables. High

child mortality was a longstanding concern of the U.A.W., and although it had been prioritized since 1947, (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1946, Dos. 42, Fl. 21) by the 1960s it was tied more directly to the Party's desire to get women into the workforce. The absence of qualified childcare threatened not simply the process of reproduction, but also that of production. By 1957, almost 70% of the land had been collectivized, and women were increasingly drawn into the rural workforce, comprising as much as 50-60 % of agricultural laborers. In response, efforts – though often insufficient – were made to provide rural areas with basic medical infrastructure. Yet, even where such facilities were available, women were often reluctant to seek medical care (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1969, Dos. 46, Fl. 78).

From 1962 to 1965, U.A.W. launched its “Mothers and Child Schools” initiative to educate of women on childcare (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1965, Dos. 76, Fl. 93). The program consisted of a 10-week course designed for young and expectant mothers but were also extended by mothers with multiple children and grandmothers. In 1965 alone, over 1,000 such schools were established, symbolically beginning on March 8th (International Women's Day) and concluding on June 1st (International Children's Day). The curriculum consisted of six concise, easy-to-understand lectures on various phases of child development (particularly for ages 1-3), nutrition, and household organization. Women were told how to diversify their children's diets, particularly by incorporating vegetables, as well as how to organize their homes to meet children's needs, including the use of single beds. In urban areas, courses were led by doctors or nurses, while in rural areas, by midwives. A 1963 U.A.W. report claimed that 14,000 women had participated in these courses (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1963, Dos. 107, Fl. 28).

The courses were held primarily in schools and outdoor venues. School personnel – mostly women – were also involved, facilitating regular interaction between women and state institutions. As women became more prominent in education and healthcare, they were expected not just to do their job but to also uphold hygiene standards in their workplaces and beyond. In one instance in Vlorë, a U.A.W. delegate reprimanded a local nurse for failing to report the unhygienic condition of a household near the village clinic (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1965, Dos. 76, Fl. 93).

The U.A.W. strongly emphasized cooperation, especially between school personnel and local sanitary institutions on childcare, ma-

ternal education and prevention. Despite efforts, these initiatives suffered the shortcomings of the state socialist logic of urgency. The mother and child schools proved effective in attracting women's attention, whenever the schools had capable lecturers and adequate materials. In 1965, U.A.W. inspectors found out that in some areas schools had never been launched (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1965, Dos. 76, Fl. 93). In rural areas where oversight and staff were lacking, courses were delivered by local school teachers and often lacked course materials. Nonetheless, such initiatives coincided with the gradual expansion of state institutions and the adoption of new hygiene norms. Where implemented properly, the schools encouraged women to seek prenatal medical care. Preventive care was particularly popular in rural areas where healthcare for pregnant women was supervised by a midwife and a nurse, or at best by a general practitioner.

By the mid-1960s, doctor visits, institutional births, and use of kindergarten and nurseries, had become normal in urban areas. In Vlorë, for example, 99 % of children were born in a maternity hospital. While maternities became popular in urban areas, rural women faced distance as a barrier. Local authorities proposed building rudimentary maternities on every collective farm, but the lack of medical personnel was an issue.

A 1965 report noted that nearly 30% of the 1,000 midwives needed in rural areas were lacking. Although this figure might seem small, it reveals that even in the late 1960s, some parts of Albania remained difficult to access and offered little to no basic healthcare. Despite overall improvements and broader access to medical services for women, in certain remote mountain areas nearly 38.9% of children were still born at home (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1965, Dos. 76, Fl. 93).

The Hygienic Household

Detaching childcare from the grip of tradition and turning it into a public, rather than concern meant that state had to intervene in the organization of the household and daily life. This was especially evident in rural areas. While there was a wide variation in living conditions in the countryside, certain characteristics were common across the country.

Living under the same roof as animals was widespread in a society that functioned as a largely autonomous economic unit, producing almost everything needed within the confines of the household. Houses varied in construction, ranging from stone to mud, but were considered

by U.A.W. delegates as dangerous environments for family members, especially children.

A 1964 issue of “*Shqiptarja e Re*”, the official organ of the U.A.W., published a layout of what was presented as a model country house (Shtëpia, *Shqiptarja e Re*, Janar, nr.1, 1964: 24). The magazine suggested the project as a prototype for future rural homes. Intended for two families, the house featured two floors, with separate entrances. The ground floor contained two rooms: a hearth room and a small kitchen, while the upper floor had two additional room, intended as sleeping quarters for the couple and their children. The article also described how the rooms could be furnished and so on. In essence the project reflected the logic of the Soviet ideal of “*kulturnost*” borrowed in the Albanian context (Meksi, 2012: 49).

Typically, a traditional Albanian household, especially in rural areas partly also in urban ones, was organized in two distinct spaces: a private and a public one. The public space consisted of a guest room, and was usually the best part of the house, while the private, everyday living quarters of the family were often poorly maintained. It was precisely this private part of the house that the state aimed to transform and elevate to the standards of the public one. In a speech, Enver Hoxha observed that despite many changes, hygiene and modern furniture were still reserved for guests, while rural households still clung to old habits. To enforce transformation in the private domain, Hoxha called not simply for intervention but for the deployment of shame – specifically, public shame (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1969, Dos. 46, Fl. 220). Exposure and public denunciation of bad habits or collective criticism gradually became part of Albanian daily life, influenced by the experience and practices of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. This occurred even though the concept of public shame was already deeply embedded in Albanian society. It is precisely in this framework that hygiene and domestic transformation were to be instilled – not merely as a matter of health, but as a condition of socialist morality which extended into the private sphere and subjected it to constant judgement.

In 1964, the Fifth Congress of the PLA (Party of Labor of Albania), called for the total collectivization of the peasantry and rural areas. Alongside this effort, the U.A.W. was asked together with other organizations like the U.L.Y.A., (The Union of Labour Youth of Albania, BRPSH) and the Fronti Demokratik (Democratic Front, F.D.), to run a campaign of hygienization of homes and push for the transformation of living quarters in line with the new way of life (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1964,

Dos. 83, Fl. 150): The U.A.W. devised an action plan, which consisted either in demonstrative actions and campaigns, inspections or the preparation of model homes as examples of spatial organization. The model house model proposed by the “*Shqiptarja e Re*” remained more of an aspiration than a reality. As a result, U.A.W. activists concentrated on the reorganization of existing domestic spaces rather than insisting on the development of new types of homes, which fell outside the organization’s mandate and scope (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1965, Dos. 76, Fl. 39).

One strategy used to popularize the new way of living was an exposition titled “*Women and Household Economy*”. This event combined live demonstrations with educational content focused on the organization and management of household space. On one hand, women were taught basic principles of home care and spatial organization; on the other, they were instructed in how to prepare vegetable preserves and cook new dishes, with the aim of diversifying the limited and monotonous rural diet (Njohuri për ekonominë shtëpiake, Botim i Kryesisë së BGSh, Tiranë, 1957). The exposition also promoted the organization of interior household spaces, recommending separate sleeping areas for children, the use of beds instead of shared sleeping arrangements, a model kitchen, and the creation of a “corner of the child” – a designated space in the home for study and play. Still, most rural and urban homes were small and rarely allowed for separate spaces for all household members.

In rural areas, new ways of living were popularized through demonstrative actions led by U.A.W. activists, supported by local authorities. Working alongside local officials and residents, activists would whitewash a house, build makeshift cesspits, and thoroughly clean the premises. They then held live demonstrations on how to use the newly reorganized spaces. The model home served as an example for other families in the village to replicate.

U.A.W. activists also advised abandoning the traditional practice of eating from a shared dish, promoting individual eating both as a hygienic measure and as part of adopting modern habits. Yet, tradition proved difficult to change: in Lezhë, many villagers objected, arguing that eating from separate dishes would “tear apart the family” (AQSH, F. 723, V. 1969, Dos. 48, Fl. 83). In Ersekë, the local U.A.W. chapter, distributed a questionnaire on the penetration and absorption of the new way of living. Although all women responded positively, a follow-up inquiry by a local schoolteacher tasked with asking their pupils about their home conditions, revealed that old habits persisted. Resistance

drew not only on tradition but also on practicality. In Ersekë and Gramsh, for example, women objected to having to clean the dishes which had multiplied by the number of family members. New norms meant a better and cultured life but they also increased women's domestic workload.

Conclusion

By involving women, state authorities aimed not only to challenge the deeply rooted conservative attitudes of the local population but also to reshape family relations. The U.A.W. advised their activists to use their spare time after work to implement new hygienic standards: washing clothes, preparing meals for the following day, boiling water for dishwashing, and cleaning the house. Household maintenance remained – and was expected to remain – a woman's domain, as women were the primary bearers of the new standards of living and hygiene. Although there were calls for a more equal distribution of domestic responsibilities among family members, housework largely stayed within the female domain. Emphasizing women's control over this new way of life reflected broader concerns about formalism and the persistence of tradition.

While kitchenware, personal dishes, single beds, and modern furniture gradually made their way into many rural Albanian homes, their adoption was often limited. The U.A.W. found it easier to work with women and promote new lifestyles because much of the state-built infrastructure in rural areas was directed specifically at them. Medical ambulatories primarily focused on prenatal care and child vaccination, while schools – staffed mostly by women – oversaw children's basic hygiene and self-care. Alongside these public institutions, intensive campaigns to improve living conditions centered largely on the woman – child relationship.

This focus became particularly significant at the height of collectivization, when collectivized land provided peasants with increased income that was expected to translate into better household conditions. Although persuading peasants to purchase furniture and kitchenware was challenging, linking hygiene and child care to the broader project of modernization – and highlighting women's central role in this transformation – proved a more effective strategy.

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