

PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

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Abstract: Gender equality in education goes beyond achieving gender parity in enrolment ratios, it also involves recognizing more subtle and complex mechanisms, such as the transmission of stereotypes, gender roles, and educational curriculum that may limit or influence the choices made by both girls and boys. The article explores the complex link between gender and education, emphasizing the importance of equal access as a fundamental human right and a central pillar of equitable societies. The article focuses on two main directions: an overview of relevant legislative frameworks and strategies addressing gender equality in education, and an analysis of key gender equality indicators in education, derived from the model developed by Subrahmanian (2005). Using a secondary data analysis based on international and national sources (official statistics, specialized reports and analyses, legislation) the study highlights disparities in enrolment, subject choice, teaching staff composition, exam performance, and employment outcomes by gender.

Keywords: gender equality, education, education access, equal opportunities, educational indicators.

Résumé : L'égalité des sexes dans l'éducation dépasse la simple parité entre filles et garçons en matière de taux d'inscription ; elle implique également la reconnaissance de mécanismes plus subtils et complexes, tels que la transmission de stéréotypes, des rôles de genre ou encore des contenus éducatifs pouvant limiter ou influencer les choix des élèves, qu'ils soient filles ou garçons. Cet article examine la lien complexe entre genre et éducation, en soulignant l'importance de l'accès équitable à l'éducation en tant que droit humain fondamental et levier essentiel pour une société plus juste. L'analyse se concentre sur deux axes principaux : un aperçu des cadres législatifs et des stratégies pertinents en matière d'égalité de genre dans l'éducation, et une analyse d'indicateurs clés, fondée sur le modèle développé par Subrahmanian (2005). À partir d'une analyse secondaire de données issues de sources nationales et internationales, l'étude met en lumière les disparités liées au genre en matière d'inscription, de choix d'études, de composition du personnel enseignant, de performance scolaire et d'insertion professionnelle.

Mots-clés : égalité de genre, éducation, accès à l'éducation, égalité des chances, indicateurs éducatifs.

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Rezumat: Egalitatea de gen în educație nu se rezumă la atingerea parității de gen în ceea ce privește ratele de participare; ci implică și recunoașterea unor mecanisme mai subtile și complexe, cum ar fi transmiterea stereotipurilor, a rolurilor de gen și a conținutului educațional care pot limita sau influența alegerile făcute atât de fete, cât și de băieți. Articolul explorează legătura complexă dintre gen și educație, subliniind importanța accesului egal la educație ca drept fundamental al omului și ca pilon central pentru o societate echitabilă. Studiul se axează pe două direcții principale: o prezentare a cadrului legislativ și a strategiilor relevante privind egalitatea de gen în educație și o analiză a indicatorilor-cheie ai egalității de gen în educație, pe baza modelului propus de Subrahmanian (2005). Având la bază o analiză secundară a datelor provenite din surse internaționale și naționale (statistici oficiale, rapoarte de specialitate, analize și legislație), articolul evidențiază disparitățile de gen în ceea ce privește rata de cuprindere în învățământ, alegerea disciplinelor, componența personalului didactic, performanțele școlare și ocuparea forței de muncă în funcție de gen.

Cuvinte-cheie: egalitate de gen, educație, acces la educație, șanse egale, indicatori educaționali.

1. Introduction

Access to education represents a fundamental human right (officially recognised in 1948, by United Nations) – regardless of individual characteristics, and alongside gender equality, constitute essential pillars for human development and for a more equitable society. Despite the notable progress of recent decades, we are still facing gender inequality and related discriminatory practices worldwide in the field of education. Girls and women face numerous barriers to fully accessing, continuing, and benefiting from education, including poverty, early marriage, pregnancy, gender-based violence, and traditional beliefs about their roles in society (UNESCO, 2024a). Although gender equality aims for gender parity – equal participation of girls/women and boys/men in education – those two concepts are not identical. Gender parity serves as an initial step or early indicator of progress toward achieving full gender equality in education: “Gender inequalities arise from the unequal power relations between women and men, and hence assessments of gender equality need to capture the relational dimensions of gender inequality” (Subrahmanian, 2005, p. 397).

Ensuring equal access to education has benefits on multiple levels, being essential both in terms of individual outcomes and societal effects. Access to high-quality and inclusive education for everyone is one of the most effective ways to prevent poverty and social exclusion, but also to acknowledge and express civic rights.

There are multiple lenses through which we can analyse the link between gender and education, and addressing the issue of gender equality in education involves a laborious process, given the diversity of quantitative and qualitative indicators that can be considered.

The article does not aim to provide an exhaustive approach but focuses on two central elements: (1) an overview of legislative frameworks and the most relevant international and national strategies designed to address equal

opportunities in education, and (2) an analysis of key gender equality indicators in education, derived from the model developed by Subrahmanian (2005). Using secondary data analysis based on official statistics, studies, strategies, and legislation – with a focus on gender equality – the paper aims to highlight general trends regarding gender equality in education at global and national levels, to provide a comprehensive perspective on Romania's position relative to broader trends.

2. Defining key-terms

Gender equality is closely linked to human rights and constitutes a central element when it comes to human-centered sustainable development. Gender equality implies that women and men, as well as girls and boys, possess equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities in all aspects of life. As it pointed out by the European Institute of Gender Equality, it “does not mean that women and men will become the same, but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born female or male” (EIGE, n.d.).

The UNICEF's definition emphasizes that true gender equality empowers all people to live with dignity and to contribute meaningfully to the world around them, without being held back by gender-based limitations: “girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development” (UNICEF, 2017, p. 3). It is widely recognized that achieving gender equality requires removing deep-rooted barriers that hinder equal opportunities for all genders – such as “discriminatory laws, customs, practices, and institutional processes” (Unterhalter & Aikman, 2007, p. 23).

Therefore, concern for the issue of gender equality is essential across all fields, and the way it is expressed serves as an indicator for the proper functioning of society. This paper explores the relation between education and gender equality, to the path of creating a school system where “boys and girls have equal opportunities to realize their full human rights and actively contribute to and benefit from economic, social, cultural, and political development” (Esteves, 2018, p. 902).

Achieving gender equality in education goes beyond simply increasing the number of women in each level of education; it also involves ensuring that girls and women have meaningful opportunities. Thus, providing equal access in and through education includes more than reaching gender parity and an equal participation of girls and boys in educational system, “it requires the unleashing of the full of power of education to tackle the unequal power relations, social norms, discriminatory practices and belief systems that underpin gender inequality and exclusion in society” (UNESCO, 2019a, p. 4).

Not least, educational institutions play a crucial role in driving positive change regarding “outdated and patriarchal mindsets about women and men, femininity and masculinity, gender relations, and gender (in)equality influence life trajectories” (Mihai, 2023, p. 5). Through education, new perspectives can be shaped

that positively influence the life trajectories of young people, thereby contributing to the building of a more equitable and inclusive society. Thus, the educational system becomes an essential pillar for promoting gender equality perspective, transforming mindsets and paving the way for equal opportunities for all.

3. Legislation, Strategies and Public Policies

3.1. Short history of international initiatives and strategies

Achieving gender equality in education represents a fundamental step in promoting sustainable development. An examination of the trajectory of initiatives advocating for this right reveal that such concerns date back to 1948, when – for the first time, the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” recognized education as a universal right, “Everyone has the right to education” (UN, 1948, article 26). It was a first step to acknowledge the importance on providing equal opportunities for all, and to emphasize the need to ensure free access to education “at least in the elementary and fundamental stages” (UN, 1948).

When it comes to gender equality and education, several key milestones need to be taken into consideration, to highlight international initiatives aimed to reduce disparities and protect the rights of girls and women all over the world. The United Nations General Assembly adopted, in 1979, the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,” which stipulated that all suitable action must be taken to eliminate discrimination against women. Apart from assuring equal rights and same opportunities to access education, another relevant aspect that emerged was the role of gender stereotypes in perpetuating inequalities in educational field:

“The elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging coeducation and other types of education which will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods.” (UN, 1979, Article 10c).

In 1995, *The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women* that took place in Beijing, highlighted the significance of providing non-discriminatory education and the benefits of investing in the literacy of women, with favourable consequences not only on individual level, but also on family balance and on macro-level, for human and sustainable development: “Literacy of women is an important key to improving health, nutrition and education in the family and to empowering women to participate in decision-making in society.” (UN Women, 1995, strategic objective B, article 69). Among the conclusions of the conference were the need to create a gender-sensitive educational system, to address gender-biased curricula (particularly the science curricula) and teaching materials, and to improve conditions for schooling of pregnant adolescents and young mothers (UN Women, 1995).

Another important initiative – established through the “Millennium Declaration” adopted by the United Nations in 2000, is “The Millennium Development Goals,” a global commitment to address key dimensions of human development by 2015. Among the eight goals, Goal 2 aimed to “achieve universal primary education” – highlighting the importance of ensuring equal access to education, regardless children’s background, and eradicating illiteracy. In addition to this perspective, Goal 3 – “Promote gender equality and empower women,” focused on eliminating gender disparity in education, reducing women’s and men’s unequal opportunities in the workforce market, and improve women’s participation in public decision-making process etc. At the end of 2015, the results shown that the number of girls enrolled in school has increased over the past 15 years: “The literacy rate among youth aged 15 to 24 has increased globally from 83 percent to 91 percent between 1990 and 2015. The gap between women and men has narrowed” (UN, 2015, p. 4), but notable disparities persist between regions and countries.

The successor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (United Nations General Assembly) as an agreed framework for international development. Two of the 17 objectives included in the SDGs are related to the subject of this article: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Goal 4) and “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (Goal 5). According to “The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024,” progress on Goal 4 has remained low since 2015, with an increased completion rate higher with three to six percent for each cycle of education (primary/ secondary school). “Globally, girls’ completion rates exceed those of boys by two to three percentage points in both primary and secondary education” (UN, 2024, p. 16). On the other hand, there are lags in basic services in schools, with direct impact for girls and students with disabilities (for example, sanitation facilities), and when it comes to Goal 5, the results remain concerning: one in five girls still marry before age 18, the number of women that cannot realize the right to decide on their sexual and reproductive health is still increased, violence against women persists and it is estimated that we need another 176 years to reach parity in women’s participation in public life and management positions (US, 2024, p. 18). These aspects are relevant in relation to the topic of education, as the more time girls and women spend in formal education, the greater their chances to recognize and overcome unjust behaviours. Hence, education becomes a tool for personal empowerment and – at a macro-social level – a tool for a more equitable society.

3.2. National legislative and policy framework

In the following section, I will highlight several aspects of Romanian legislation concerning the gender dimension in the field of education. A particular feature of is the lack of specific references to “gender equality,” the phrase used in legislation and public policies is predominantly “equality of opportunities between women and men,” often abbreviated to “equal opportunities,” which – according

to Băluță & Dumitru (2023) “introduces ambiguity and may lead to the exclusion of the gender dimension” (p. 13).

Although in the “Law of Pre-University Education no. 198/2023” the word *gender* is entirely absent from the text, there are a few paragraphs that emphasize the principle of ensuring equity and equal opportunities, by eliminating barriers – whether ethnic, religious, disability-related, or others – combating discrimination, and personalizing educational paths based on specific needs (Law 198/2003, article 3, letter i) – but, as it was mentioned before, there are no specifications regarding gender or sex. The Law 198/2023 also stipulated as an obligation of teaching staff to uphold the principle of equity and to promote respect for diversity and support inclusive, and tolerant attitudes among students (Article 228).

A similar situation is found in The Law on Higher Education no. 199/2023, that has no reference to word *gender* or *gender equality*, being exposed in a general way the fact that admission to university study programs is carried out in accordance with the principles of equity and equal opportunities, without any forms of discrimination (Law 199, 2023, Article 35) and that one of the principle that regulates students’ activity is of non-discrimination, under which each all students are entitled to equal treatment (Law 199, 2023, article 126a).

Regarding the gender dimension in education, the Education Laws are complemented by the more comprehensive provisions of “Law 202/ 2002 on Equal Opportunities and Treatment between Women and Men” (Articles 14 and 15). Article 14 of Law no. 202/2022 prohibits all forms of sex-based discrimination in access to education and training at all levels. It requires educational institutions, as well as other authorized training providers, to actively include and promote topics and activities on equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men. Another relevant aspect is included in Article 15, which states that the Ministry of Education will promote:

“Recommendations for the development of university courses, tools for evaluating school textbooks, school curricula, and guides for the implementation of school programs that exclude elements of gender [sex] discrimination, as well as negative behavioural models and stereotypes regarding the roles of women and men in public and family life” (Law 202/2002, article 15(2)).

However, although these provisions exist at the legislative level, it is unclear how they are being implemented – at least when it comes to the development of the school curriculum. A detailed analysis on the integration of gender equality in the school curriculum and extracurricular activities, as well as the initiatives undertaken in recent years to address gender stereotypes and biases in textbooks, and the disproportionate representation of male/female figures, is available in the report “Gender Equality in Education” – *Chapter 5* (Mihai, 2023).

The “National Strategy for the Promotion on Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Women and Men, 2022–2027,” adopted by the Romanian Government on December 2022, emphasize the role of educational system in

promoting equality of opportunities between women in male, by school curriculum and extracurricular activities, but also through teaching staff specialized in matters concerning equal opportunities and treatment: “Thus, stereotypes and prejudices regarding the social roles of women and men must be challenged and deconstructed through appropriate educational policies, starting from primary education and continuing through lifelong learning” (Romanian Government, 2022, p. 31). Furthermore, the strategy reiterates the importance of completing the revision of school textbooks to ensure the effective implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and treatment between women and men, as well as alignment with existing strategies at the European Union’ level. The two specific objectives in the Education area focus on (1.1) “removing stereotypes and prejudices regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and society, through appropriate education measures” and (2) “eliminating factors that lead to imbalances between women and men in certain fields of study, including STEM” (Romanian Government, 2022, pp. 37-38) – considering the fact that girls continue to be discouraged – by various social norms – from pursuing studies in technical fields.

4. Key facts on gender equality in education

Methodology The following section of the article presents – through a secondary data analysis – an overview of the main data on gender equality in education, based on a set of indicators adapted from the model proposed by Subrahmanian (2005), which focuses on three core elements:

- 1) *Rights to education* – education is evaluated on indicators as access, survival, attendance, retention, and transition between levels of education;
- 2) *Rights within education* – education is evaluated in terms of equality of treatment, and equality of outcome;
- 3) *Rights through education* – emphasizes the link between education and other social institutions.

Thus, derived from this approach, the analysis focuses on six indicators:

Equal access to	Equality within	Equality through
1) Literacy rate 2) Gross enrolment ratio 3) The number of female and male teachers	4) Subject choice 5) Performance in examinations	6) Employment rate based on educational level

The article has the following **objectives**: (1) To explore global and national trends in literacy rates, based on gender dimension; (2) To establish the gross enrolment ratio by gender at different levels of education; (3) To highlight the gender distribution among teaching staff across various levels of education; (4) To explore gender preferences and differences in subject choice; (5) To assess students’ performance in examinations based on gender; (6) To evaluate the employment rate by gender based on educational attainment.

To achieve these objectives, data have been selected from official statistical sources, specialized reports, and other analyses carried out at the global, European, and national levels. The key sources are: European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], UNESCO, Eurostat, The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], Ministry of Education – Romania, and the National Institute of Statistics Romania [INS].

Results

Literacy rate: Globally, there are 754 million non-literate youth and adults, of which 63 percent are women, a percentage that has remained constant over recent decades (UNESCO, 2024b, p. 2). Despite a general increase in global literacy rates among both men and women, literacy levels remain higher on average for males. As of 2023, the global literacy rate was 91 percent for men and slightly below 84 percent for women aged 15 years and above (UNESCO via World Bank, 2025). The disparity becomes more significant when the figures are analysed by region.

In Romania, the value for adult literacy rate is 99 percent (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). According to *the 2021 Population and Housing Census*, the percentage of the resident population aged 14 and above who were illiterate was 0.83 (134873 people): 0.7 percent of women are illiterate and 1 percent of men (INS, 2022).

Gross enrolment ratio: Between 2015 and 2023, the global completion rate has increased from 85 percent to 88 percent in primary education, from 74 percent to 78 percent in lower secondary education, and from 53 percent to 59 percent in upper secondary education (UNESCO, 2024b, p. 2). Globally, “the gross enrolment ratio” for primary and secondary education for both sexes was 81.13 percent in 2023 (UIS, n.d.).

In Romania, during the 2023-2024 school year, the gross enrolment rate (as a percentage of population aged 6-23) across all levels of education –from preschool to higher education – was 74.9 percent (75.8% for women and 71.1% for men), while for pre-university education the rate was 71.8 percent (ME, 2024a). Gender disparities were observed, with slightly higher enrolment rates among boys from pre-primary school to lower secondary education and for professional education, and increased rates for girls in particularly in post-secondary and high-school education (71.9% – girls’ gross enrolment rate and 64.4% for boys) – as shown in Table 1.

Another important aspect is access to early childhood education, since preschool education has a beneficial role in a child’s future academic career, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as it significantly contributes to the growth of intellectual and social abilities. With a gross enrolment ratio for pre-primary school of 84.2 percent for girls and 84.6 percent for boys, Romania must intensify its efforts to raise these rates.

Table 1. Data collected and processed from the Ministry of Education (2024) – “Report on the State of Pre-University Education in Romania 2023–2024”.

All data refer specifically to the 2023–2024 school year.

	Children enrolled in childhood education and care services	Gross enrolment ratio for pre-primary school	Gross enrolment ratio for primary and lower secondary education	Gross enrolment ratio for primary education
Female	47.8%	84.2%	82.3%	83.5%
Male	52.2%	84.6%	83.2%	84.4%
F-M difference		-0.4%	-0.9%	-0.9%
	Gross enrolment ratio for lower secondary education	Gross enrolment ratio for high school education	Gross enrolment ratio for professional education	Gross enrolment ratio for post-secondary education
Female	80.8%	71.9%	10.1%	20%
Male	81.7%	64.4%	17.5%	8%
F-M difference	-0.90%	7.50%	-7.4%	12%

Higher education: Women tend to participate in tertiary education at higher rates than men: in 2020, the gross enrolment ratio was 43 percent for women, compared to 37 percent for men. Among the 146 countries with available data, 106 reported a gender gap favouring women, while 30 showed a gap in favour of men (UNESCO, 2025c, p. 17). Across all OECD member countries, women aged 25 to 34 are equally or more likely than men in the same age group to hold a tertiary qualification, with rates of 54 percent versus 41 percent on average in OECD countries (OECD, 2024, p. 1).

The Gender Equality Index also includes data on tertiary education enrolment; however, it is essential to begin by presenting some general statistics. The European Union average 2024 Gender Equality Index score stands at 71 points and shows significant national variation across Member States, ranging from 82 points in Sweden to 57.5 points in Romania (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2024, p. 16). In the domain of *Knowledge* - the second lowest-scoring domain of the index - (which measures gender inequalities in educational attainment, participation in education and training over the life course and gender segregation), Romania ranks third from the bottom (55.4 points) (EIGE, 2024, p. 36).

Women aged between 15 and 49 are more likely than men to hold a tertiary degree, whereas among those over the age of 65, men are in the majority in this regard. Gender disparities are significant in the 25–49 age group (with 11% in favour for women), and in the 65+ age group, where 22% of men have completed tertiary education compared to 15% of women in the same group, as shown in Figure 1. The sub-domain of segregation in education scores 54.5 points at the European Union level, and of 52.1 in Romania, where 34% of the female population

enrolled in tertiary education fields such as education, health and welfare, humanities and arts, compared to 18% of men (EIGE, 2024).

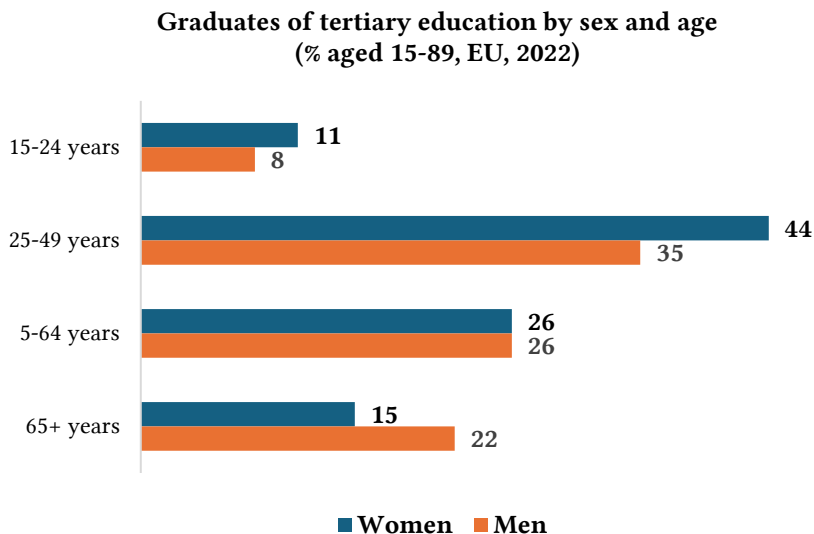


Figure 1. Authors' figure based on data from EIGE (2024) – "Gender Equality Index 2024" (p. 39)

During the 2023-2024 academic year, the gross enrolment rate in *higher education* was 38.9%, with females outnumbering males by 6 percentage points (41.7% – women compared to 36% – men) (Ministry of Education, 2024b, p. 38). Analysing data by type of tertiary education, it can be observed that the percentage of women continuing their studies at the doctoral level decreases (Figure 2). The gap between women and men who graduated with a master's degree is 22.4 percent, while at the doctoral level, it drops to 13.6 percent (Ministry of Education, 2024b).

Subject choice: According to *Global Monitoring Report 2024*, women accounted for 35 percent of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) graduates (2018-2023). Among 122 countries, only nine had a female majority among STEM graduates, and the results reveal a connection between the share of female graduates and the level of mathematic anxiety: "high shares of female STEM graduates in Arab countries coincide with lower mathematics anxiety" (UNESCO, 2024c, p. 3).

In the European Union, in 2021, the share of women in STEM occupations was only by 23 percent, with a minimum improvement from 2005, by 4 percent (UNESCO, 2024d, p. 32). In Romania, the percentage of graduates from STEM programmes in tertiary education was 20.34 percent for female in 2022 (with a percent of 16.8 in 2000), and 40.36 percent for male (UIS).

**The proportion of higher education graduates with diplomas,
by study cycles and by gender, at the end of the 2022/2023
academic year (Romania)**

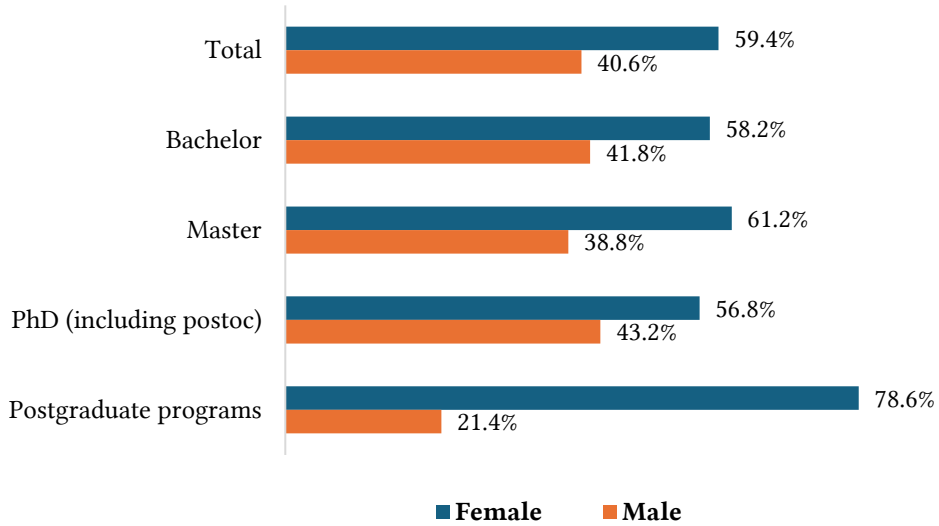


Figure 2. Authors' figure based on data from Ministry of Education (2024b) – “Report on the state of higher education in Romania 2023-2024” (p. 42)

Various interconnected factors at the individual, family, societal levels, influence the participation and performance of girls and women in STEM studies and work, “all of which interact in complex ways for girls and women in all their diversity” (UNESCO, 2024d, p. 12).

According to PISA data from 2022, across OECD countries, boys outperformed girls in mathematics by nine score points, while girls outperformed boys in reading by 24 score points (OECD, 2023, pp. 123-124). Beyond these figures, the way young people perform in different areas can influence their future choices, as well as their academic and professional development. Boys who struggle with reading and lack foundational skills may encounter barriers to further education, attractive job opportunities, and personal development. Meanwhile, the lower representation of girls among top performers in science and mathematics contributes to the ongoing gender gap in STEM careers, which are among the highest-paid (OECD, 2017).

As stated by OECD (2017) “15-year-old boys are, on average, more than twice as likely as girls to expect to work as engineers, scientists or architects. And while less than 0.5% of girls wish to be ICT professionals, almost 5% of boys do.” (p. 105). Moreover, “In 2024, 80.5% of men were employed as ICT (information and communication technology) specialists in the EU against 19.5% of women” (Eurostat, *ICT specialists in employment*, 2025c), while in 2022, women held fewer than a quarter of jobs in science, engineering, and ICT, and occupied just over one-

fifth of technology roles within companies (UNESCO, 2024c, p. 3). The career paths begin to diverge since adolescence (age of 15), long before major career decisions are made. A contributing factor to this early divergence is the presence of deep-rooted stereotypes about which domains are considered suitable for women, and which are deemed appropriate for men. These stereotypes are frequently transmitted to children not only by their families and teachers but also reinforced by societal norms and cultural expectations at large.

In Romania, although a larger proportion of women engage in university education, there are clear disparities in the fields of study chosen by women and men. This disparity is also reflected in the labour market, where women tend to occupy less advantageous positions. Even though women have a higher enrolment rate in higher education, as shown in Figure 3, there are several fields of study that are heavily female-dominated (Biological and biomedical sciences – 74.3%, Social Sciences – 65.4%, Humanities and Arts – 63.7%), while Engineering Studies has a significant percentage of male graduates (70.9%) (INS, 2022).

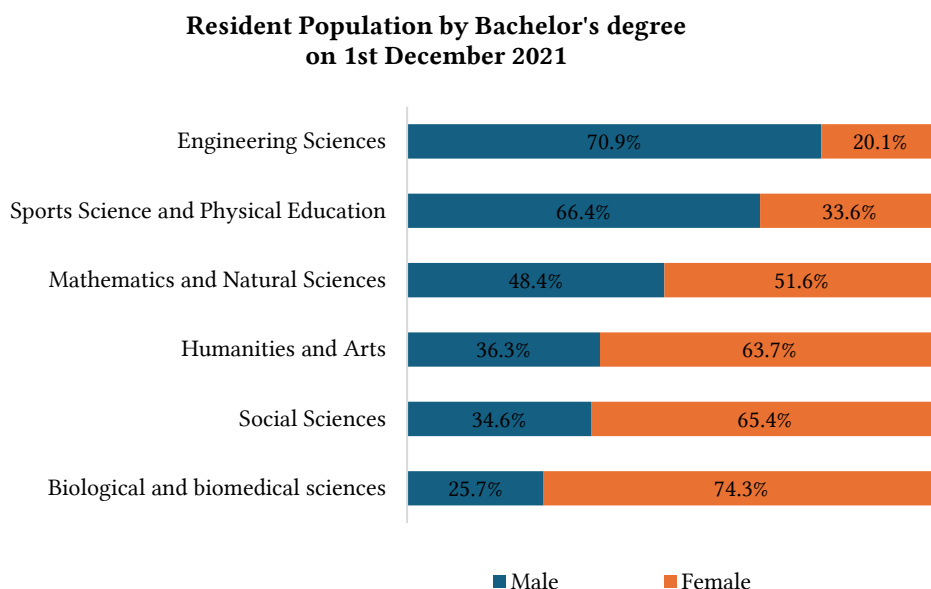


Figure 3. Authors' calculation and figure based on data from INS (2022) – "The 2021 Population and Housing Census"

Statistics on early leavers from education and training: In European Union (2024), 9.3 percent of young people aged 18-24 were "early leavers from education and training": the share of early leavers in 2024 ranged from two percent in Croatia to 16.8 percent in Romania across EU countries. The proportion of early leavers from education and training is higher for young men (10.9%) than for young women (7.7%) in EU and nearly all countries reported higher early leaving rates among young men compared to young women, except for Romania (Eurostat, 2025a). Romania is therefore characterized by the highest rate of early school

leaving among young people, with women being more likely than men to exit the education system prematurely.

Another important indicator – “*the share of young people neither in employment, nor in education or training*” [NEET] –, highlights the relation between education and work, as well as the extent to which young people remain active, either within the education system or the labour market. According to Eurostat, in 2024, 11 percent of individuals aged 15 to 29 in the European Union were NEET. Romania recorded the highest NEET rate within the EU – 19 percent, while the Netherlands obtained the lowest percentage (5%) (Eurostat, 2025b). These figures reveal significant disparities in youth school engagement across the European Union, while high NEET rates are often linked to social and economic inequalities among young people. When it comes to gender, young women are more likely to be neither in employment nor in education or training than young men: recently data (2024) show that in European Union, 12.1 percent of women aged 15-29 years were NEET, compared to 10 percent of men with the same age. Romania ranks first based on the largest difference between the proportion of young female NEETs and young men’s: 11.2 percent (Eurostat, 2025b).

Several factors may explain the observed gender disparity, including social norms and societal pressures that tend to reinforce traditional gender roles – assigning women a primary role within the household, while positioning men as the main economic providers. Eurostat (2025b) data highlights the fact that as young women become older, they are more often NEET than the youngest group.

Employment rate

The analysis of gender equality in education is closely linked to the transition into the labour market. Results indicate that as the level of completed education grows, so do the chances of entering the labour market. However, obtaining a degree does not guarantee increased employability, and women – although they, on average, spend more time studying and outperform men in education – confront with bigger challenges on labour market.

For instance, completing tertiary education does not contribute to reducing the gender pay gap. At the OECD level, young women with a tertiary qualification earn, on average, 83 percent of the salary of their male counterparts (Romania: 88%). Among those with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification, young women earn on average 84 percent of their male peers’ salaries in the OECD and 90 percent in Romania (OECD, 2024).

The most recent data (2023) on the employment rate of the working-age population (defined as the share of employed persons of working age in the total working-age population) indicate that women (aged 15–64) are less likely to be employed than men, with the gap being widest for those with below upper secondary educational attainment (28.7 percent difference between employment rate for men and women that graduated low education level: gymnasium, primary and with no school, and 18.2 percent for medium education level) and narrowest for those with tertiary attainment (tertiary education at all levels): 3.2 percent (INS, 2024).

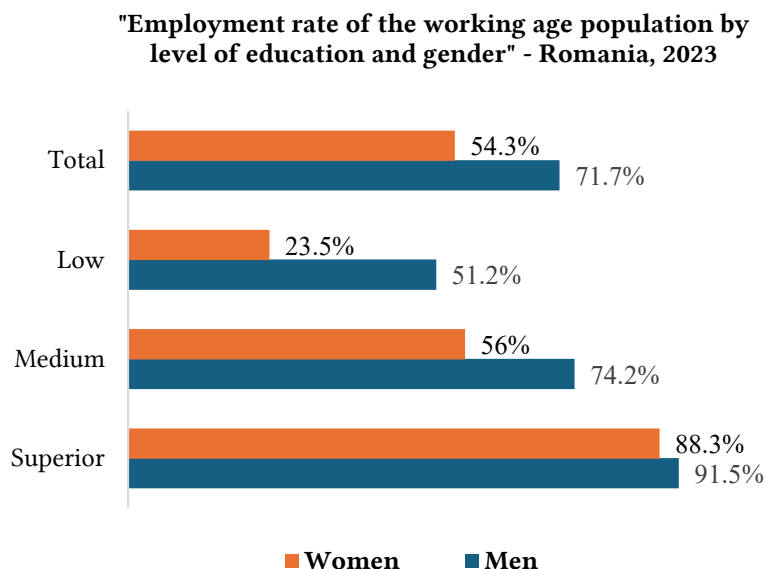


Figure 4. Author's figure based on data from INS (2024) – "Labour force in Romania: employment and unemployment, 2023" (p. 31)

Performance in examinations

For the 2022-2023 school year, the high-school graduation rate – both with and without the baccalaureate exam – reached 66.2 percent, the lowest value recorded between 2014 to 2023. Girls outperformed boys in terms of high-school graduation, with a difference of ten percent (71.4% compared to 61.4%). The graduation including the baccalaureate exam was also higher among women (51.1 percent), with values at least 13 percentage points above of those of the male school population (ME, 2024a, p. 50).

The analysis of data on the baccalaureate exam pass ratio (out of the total number of students present) by gender in 2024 reveals the pass rate is higher among female students (82.8% compared to 76.2%) and that female students achieved higher grades than their male counterparts. 26.7 percent of girls scored between 8 and 10 (14.2% scores between 9 and 10), compared to 16.8 percent of boys (7.1% - 9 to 10), while 8.2 percent of girls scored between 6 and 6,99, compared to 10.5 percent of boys (ME, 2024a, p. 53).

The number of female and male teachers

The proportion of female teaching staff in the Romanian education system is highest at the preschool (99.7%) and primary (93.5%) levels. In lower secondary education (gymnasium), women represent 74.4 percent of the teaching staff overall, while in high school education (72.9%), the proportion of female teaching staff is higher in urban (73%) than in rural schools (70.4%) (ME, 2024a, pp. 39-40). Although the percentage of women employed in pre-university education is significantly

higher – emphasizing the fact that education is a female-dominated sector, the situation is more balanced in higher education system.

The gender distribution among higher education teaching staff indicated that, starting with the 2016-2017 academic year, the proportion of female exceeded 50 percent and has continued to grow each year. In 2023-2024 academic year, the proportion of female teaching staff reached 53.8 percent, with an increase of 1.5 percent compared to the previous year (ME, 2024b, p. 52). However, higher education in Romania is predominantly led by men, even though the percentage of women in leadership positions has increased in recent years: in the 2023-2024 academic year, the value of the indicator was 44.1 percent (ME, 2024b, p. 52), while in 2022-2023 was 42.6 percent (ME, 2023, p. 50).

Globally, women accounted for only 31 percent of all researchers in 2022, while in Romania, the proportion is higher – 46.11 percent female researchers in 2022 (UIS, 2025 – *Researchers*).

Conclusions

While the gender gap in education narrows, as in terms of enrolment rates to all levels of education, we are still facing inequalities regarding promoting gender equality in education through curriculum, addressing stereotypes about gender roles and tackling imbalances in education fields (for example, STEM), access to sexual education, managing gender violence and others.

At the global level, beyond the progress made – which has been accelerated by international legislation and strategies – there are still obstacles that influence the education and well-being of girls and women. These issues highlight the importance of expanding access to formal education for girls and women, not only as a tool for addressing injustices but also as a powerful mechanism to achieve greater social equity and gender equality. According to United Nations (2024), it is estimated that another 176 years are needed to reach parity in women's participation in public life and management positions.

In Romania, the gross enrolment rate across all levels of education was 74.9 percent for the 2023-2024 year (75.8% versus 71.1%) (ME, 2024a). Gender disparities were observed, with slightly higher enrolment rates among boys up to the lower secondary level, and increased rates for girls in post-secondary and high-school education. While a higher percentage of women pursue university education, significant imbalances remain in the fields of study. These differences are mirrored in the labour market, where women are more likely to occupy less advantageous or paid positions.

Also, across Member States of EU, Romania is characterized by the highest rate of early school leaving among young people, women being more likely than men to exit the education system prematurely. Social norms and societal pressures regarding traditional gender roles may explain some of the disparities recorded in the disadvantage of women. On the other hand, the transition to labour market brings extra challenges for women, even though they outperform men in education. Data show that women (aged 15–64) are less likely to be employed than

men, and their chances decrease as the completed level of education completed is lower.

Given this data, it is important to monitor how Romania will adopt and implement the provisions established at the European level, as well as those outlined in national documents – such as “The National Strategy for the Promotion of Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Women and Men” (2022). As previously mentioned, gender equality in education is not limited to gender parity in terms of enrolment, but also involves recognizing more subtle and complex mechanisms, such as the transmission of stereotypes, biases, and educational content that may limit or influence the choices made by both girls and boys. Ensuring equal educational opportunities generates positive effects not only for individuals, but also across generations and on societal level.

Finally, to achieve gender equality and to raise awareness of this issue among both the general population and decision-makers, it is important to explicitly appropriate terminology in legislation, public documents, and public discourse.

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