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# ADOLESCENT MOTHERS CAUGHT BETWEEN ABUSE, CONTROL, AND SILENCE: INVISIBLE FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS IN ROMANIA'S VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

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**Abstract**: This article examines early motherhood in Romania as a critical manifestation of structural and symbolic violence within vulnerable communities. Moving beyond traditional public health perspectives, the study employs the lenses of structural violence and intersectionality to decrypt how systemic exclusion and gender inequalities shape the life trajectories of adolescent girls. Through an analysis of academic literature and secondary statistical data, the research highlights a disturbing correlation between childhood pregnancy and invisible forms of coercion, particularly sexual abuse. The analysis reveals that institutional indifference often misinterprets passive survival as individual resilience, effectively shifting the burden of protection from the state to the minor. Furthermore, the study explores how domestic power dynamics and financial dependency function as mechanisms of social exclusion, further silencing victims. The article concludes by advocating for a fundamental shift in social work practice, from rigid administrative management to an emancipatory, rights-based approach. By recognizing adolescent mothers as subjects of rights rather than mere administrative cases, the proposed framework aims to transform social intervention into an active shield against oppression, turning systemic invisibility into social presence and empowerment.

**Keywords**: early motherhood, structural violence, symbolic violence, intersectionality, institutional indifference, sexual abuse, social exclusion, empowerment.

**Résumé** : Cet article examine la maternité précoce en Roumanie comme une manifestation critique de la violence structurelle et symbolique au sein des communautés vulnérables. Dépassant les perspectives traditionnelles de santé publique, l'étude utilise les prismes de la violence structurelle et de l'intersectionnalité pour décrypter comment l'exclusion systémique et les inégalités de genre façonnent les trajectoires de vie des adolescentes. À travers une analyse de la littérature académique et des données statistiques secondaires, la recherche met en évidence une corrélation inquiétante entre la grossesse infantile et des formes invisibles de coercition, notamment les abus sexuels. L'analyse révèle que l'indifférence institutionnelle interprète souvent la survie passive comme une résilience individuelle, déplaçant ainsi la charge de la protection de l'État vers la mineure. De plus, l'étude explore comment la dynamique du pouvoir domestique et la dépendance financière fonctionnent comme des mécanismes d'exclusion sociale, réduisant davantage les victimes

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au silence. L'article conclut en plaidant pour un changement fondamental dans la pratique du travail social, passant d'une gestion administrative rigide à une approche émancipatrice fondée sur les droits, visant à transformer l'intervention sociale en un bouclier actif contre l'oppression.

**Mots-clés :** maternité précoce, violence structurelle, violence symbolique, intersectionnalité, indifférence institutionnelle, abus sexuel, exclusion sociale, autonomisation.

**Rezumat**: Acest articol analizează maternitatea timpurie în România ca o manifestare critică a violenței structurale și simbolice în cadrul comunităților vulnerabile. Depășind perspectivele tradiționale de sănătate publică, studiul utilizează cadrele teoretice ale violenței structurale și intersecționalității pentru a decripta modul în care excluderea sistemică și inegalitățile de gen modelează traiectoriile de viață ale adolescentelor. Prin analiza literaturii de specialitate și a datelor statistice secundare, cercetarea evidențiază o corelație îngrijorătoare între sarcina infantilă și forme invizibile de coerciție, în special abuzul sexual. Analiza relevă faptul că indiferența instituțională interpretează adesea supraviețuirea pasivă drept reziliență individuală, transferând astfel povara protecției de la stat către minoră. Mai mult, studiul explorează modul în care dinamica puterii domestice și dependența financiară funcționează ca mecanisme de excluziune socială, menținând victimele într-o stare de tăcere. Articolul concluzionează pledând pentru o schimbare fundamentală în practica asistenței sociale, trecerea de la o gestionare administrativă rigidă către o abordare emancipatoare, bazată pe drepturi. Recunoscând mamele adolescente ca subiecte de drepturi, cadrul propus urmărește transformarea intervenției sociale într-un scut activ împotriva opresiunii.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** maternitate timpurie, violență structurală, violență simbolică, intersecționalitate, indiferență instituțională, abuz sexual, excluziune socială, empowerment.

## 1. Introduction

Violence against girls in Romania's vulnerable communities often transcends visible physical aggression, manifesting instead through subtle layers of control, coercion, and structural neglect. Within this framework, early motherhood should not be viewed merely as a public health issue or a byproduct of educational gaps; rather, in reality, this is one of the most ignored forms of gender-based violence, made all the more dangerous because society has treated it as something „normal" for so long (UNFPA, 2022). This article provides a theoretical and conceptual analysis of early motherhood in Romania, employing the lenses of structural violence and intersectionality, grounded in academic literature and secondary statistical data.

Teenage pregnancy is a global phenomenon with well-documented structural drivers and significant repercussions for health, education, and social inclusion. Globally, the birth rate among adolescents aged 15 to 19 fell from 64.5 to 41.3 per 1,000 girls between 2000 and 2023. However, this progress remains uneven across regions, and the absolute number of births remains high, particularly among girls under the age of 14 (WHO, 2024). UNICEF emphasizes that early pregnancies

are intrinsically linked to poverty, low educational attainment, gender inequalities, child marriage, and exposure to violence or sexual abuse. These factors disproportionately affect children and adolescents from marginalized backgrounds, serving to perpetuate intergenerational cycles of social exclusion (UNICEF, 2021).

In Romania, national statistics reveal a persistently high rate of adolescent motherhood, placing the country among the highest-ranking EU member states in this regard. Far from being a mere demographic variable, the incidence of early childbirth serves as a barometer for the failure of protection and education systems in vulnerable environments. The scale of this phenomenon is corroborated by official indicators from the TEMPO database and population census results, which signal a worrying persistence of motherhood among girls under 15. These figures do more than report raw data; they highlight marked territorial disparities and an inherent correlation between childhood motherhood and structural factors such as school dropout and precarious socioeconomic status. Consequently, official statistics stand as evidence of how systemic exclusion and the lack of developmental alternatives trap young women in a cycle of vulnerability (INS, 2026; INS, 2023). Simultaneously, UNICEF's analysis of the Romanian context highlights that pregnancies at very young ages are frequently associated with early school leaving, limited access to reproductive health services and social protection, and an increased risk of poverty (UNICEF, 2021).

Ultimately, this statistical reality is not just a number in a demographic report; it represents a collection of fractured life trajectories. The motherhood of a girl under the age of 18, and even more so under the age of 15, cannot be interpreted as a neutral demographic data point. From a legal and ethical perspective, it constitutes a serious indicator of possible sexual abuse and systemic pressure. Explanations that frame the phenomenon as „cultural" or as a form of „precocious maturity" function as myths that obscure its gravity. What such cases actually reveal is the collapse of the protective mechanisms designed to safeguard children. In marginalized communities, this collapse leaves girls without viable alternatives, resulting in what the UNFPA (2022) describes as a grave violation of fundamental human rights.

## 2. Methodology

This article is a conceptual, literature-based study; it does not rely on the collection of primary empirical data. The analysis draws on two categories of sources. The first consists of academic literature on structural violence, symbolic violence, and intersectionality, in particular the theoretical contributions of Galtung, Bourdieu, Farmer, and Crenshaw, together with peer-reviewed studies on adolescent pregnancy, childhood sexual abuse, resilience, and social work practice. These works were identified through searches of international academic databases and were selected on the basis of their relevance to the theoretical framework and to the Romanian context. The second category consists of secondary statistical data and reports produced by national and international institutions, including the

National Institute of Statistics (the TEMPO database and the results of the 2021 census), ANPDCA, UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, Save the Children Romania, and the FILIA Center; these sources were selected on the basis of their official or institutional provenance and their recency.

The material was analyzed thematically; statistical indicators and the patterns documented in the literature were interpreted through the combined lenses of structural violence and intersectionality, in order to identify the mechanisms through which early motherhood is produced and rendered socially invisible. The implications for social work practice presented in the final sections are derived from this interpretive analysis. As a conceptual review, the study is subject to the limitations inherent in secondary sources, in particular the underreporting associated with official statistics on sexual abuse.

## 3. What does invisible violence entail?

Violence is rarely limited to physical aggression or explicit threats. Much of it remains hidden, embedded in everyday life through mechanisms that may not appear violent at first sight, yet produce comparable harm. The scholarly literature distinguishes three main layers of violence: direct, structural, and symbolic. Direct violence is the most easily recognizable form, encompassing visible acts of aggression such as physical or sexual abuse. In such cases, a specific perpetrator and a discrete act can be identified and readily classified by law and society as a crime. It is the most visible dimension of the problem, yet it often represents only a fraction of the phenomenon. Structural violence, by contrast, does not require an identifiable perpetrator; it is embedded in the social and institutional systems that generate persistent inequality. As Galtung (1969) argued, these social structures are violent because they prevent individuals from meeting their basic needs or realizing their full potential, even in the absence of physical aggression in the traditional sense. Consequently, unequal access to education, chronic poverty, or precarious healthcare services function as forms of violence that often go unexamined.

Symbolic violence, a concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu, refers to the processes through which domination is internalized by the dominated subjects as „natural" or „normal." Cultural norms and practices legitimize and reproduce inequalities without being experienced as aggressive acts, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of existing power structures (Bourdieu, 1991).

In the case of early motherhood, these forms of violence do not operate in isolation; they intersect and reinforce one another. It is therefore inadequate to view adolescent pregnancy through a purely biological lens or as a simple matter of personal choice. Rather, it is the predictable consequence of structural inequalities: a system that systematically exposes vulnerable girls to risk by restricting their access to information and sexual health services, while keeping them constrained by poverty and rigid cultural expectations. When such systemic

conditions limit young women's capacity to control their own sexuality and protect themselves, they function as a form of invisible structural violence.

Furthermore, symbolic violence contributes to the normalization of these realities. Social norms that sanction female sexuality or blame girls for the consequences of abuse keep them silent, making their experiences seem like personal failings rather than the result of unjust social practices. From this perspective, „invisibility" does not denote an absence of harm, but an absence of recognition. When society fails, or refuses, to identify these patterns as violence, they escape the reach of legal and political mechanisms. What is at stake is not a series of isolated, unfortunate events, but a consolidated web of social norms and ingrained cultural practices that maintain these girls in a state of constant vulnerability. Ultimately, this reframing shifts the analytical perspective: early motherhood ceases to be a „personal choice" and emerges as the predictable outcome of systemic inequalities that have long been ignored.

## 4. Structural violence and intersectionality in the production of social invisibility

Early motherhood in Romania cannot be adequately understood as a series of isolated incidents; it constitutes a significant indicator of deep-seated gender inequality and structural violence. Viewed through Paul Farmer's (2004) analytical lens, economic and legal systems can profoundly damage life trajectories even in the absence of direct physical aggression. From this perspective, a teenage pregnancy is rarely a „personal choice". More often, it is the outcome of a „geography of exclusion", in which the absence of sexual education and healthcare confines girls to a cycle of dependency from which they can rarely escape on their own (Farmer, 2004; Zamfir et al., 2001). This requires an intersectional lens, capable of showing how chronic poverty, gender inequality, and rural isolation converge, transforming a young girl's body into a site of family and community control. This convergence is compounded by a form of systemic indifference: the state frequently misinterprets a girl's basic survival as „resilience". By attributing resilience to individuals who are merely coping with extreme conditions, institutions displace responsibility, transferring the duty of protection from the institution onto the individual. This displacement legitimizes inaction in the face of „slow violence" (Nixon, 2011), a form of aggression that unfolds gradually and remains largely undetected by standard monitoring.

Furthermore, institutional indifference is validated through symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 2001), where social work and education professionals may internalize community prejudices, perceiving early-age pregnancy as an accepted local element. This perceptive distortion transforms the failure of the protection system into a socially accepted phenomenon, leaving abuse and coercion invisible to the bureaucratic apparatus. Thus, invisibility is not accidental; it is the product of structures that prioritize administrative procedures over human vulnerability. A re-evaluation of risk indicators is necessary, one that transcends medical data to

include the analysis of power dynamics and structural barriers to fundamental rights (UNICEF, 2021). Within this framework of systemic inequalities, one of the most direct yet frequently invisibilized forms of violence against girls is sexual abuse, whose link to early motherhood remains insufficiently addressed.

## 5. Sexual abuse as the invisible premise of early motherhood

In the analysis of early motherhood, the dimension of sexual abuse cannot be treated as a secondary variable, but rather, it is a major structural factor that precedes and shapes the life trajectories of adolescent girls. International literature consistently points to a strong association between experiences of childhood sexual abuse and an increased risk of teenage pregnancy, an association that is also emphasized in clinical reviews of the antenatal care of pregnant adolescents (Whitworth et al., 2017).

The most robust quantitative evidence is provided by the meta-analysis conducted by Noll et al. (2009), which aggregated 21 studies and found that a history of childhood sexual abuse increases the odds of adolescent pregnancy by a factor of 2.21 (95% CI: 1.94–2.51). A supplementary analysis reported in the same study suggested that approximately 4.5 out of 10 pregnant adolescents may have a prior history of sexual abuse. These findings do not merely indicate a statistical correlation, but reveal a cumulative vulnerability: sexual trauma affects psychosocial development, the ability to negotiate personal boundaries, and access to protection mechanisms, thereby amplifying exposure to unequal or coercive relationships. In the Romanian context, the scale of this phenomenon is confirmed by official data. According to reports from the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption (ANPDCA, 2024), sexual abuse of minors remains an alarming constant, with over one thousand cases reported annually. The majority of these cases involve young girls, with a higher incidence in rural or marginalised areas. Early 2024 analyses indicate a persistence of this pattern; we see a predominance of female victims and a concentration of cases in regions characterized by limited access to support and intervention services.

However, the discrepancy between official figures and independent research suggests a significant level of underreporting. A study by Save the Children Romania (Salvați Copiii, 2022) indicates self-reported victimization rates that proportionally exceed formally recorded cases, confirming the deeply invisible nature of sexual violence against children. Underreporting is fueled by factors such as economic dependence on the perpetrator, familial pressure, fear of stigmatization, and a lack of trust in the judicial system.

This invisibility is further exacerbated by challenges within the legal sphere. Data analyzed by the FILIA Center (Centrul FILIA, 2022) and by Băluță and Tufiș (2022) show that only a small percentage of sexual offense reports involving minor victims result in indictments. Furthermore, court practices remain inconsistent in their interpretation of consent. Romania's convictions at the European Court of Human Rights for inadequate investigations into rape cases

highlight the fragility of existing protection mechanisms. Consequently, abuse is not merely an individual act of aggression; it becomes a systemically tolerated phenomenon through the inefficiency of institutional intervention.

In rural areas, where reported incidence is higher, vulnerability is amplified by geographical isolation, poverty, and cultural norms that may trivialize the severity of sexual violence. When legal aid, counseling, and protection are out of reach, many girls find themselves stuck in the very place where they were first victimized. The data from ANPDCA (2024) reveal a significant gap between the formal identification of abuse and the effective protection of the child: only a small fraction of these cases reach the courts, and emergency protection measures remain rare.

This is not solely a failure of the legal system; it also reflects a cultural dimension. Practices such as virginity testing, despite being condemned as human rights violations, reveal a deep-seated social logic in which a girl's body is subject to constant surveillance (Băluță & Tufiș, 2022). In this environment, a pregnancy is often reframed as a matter of family „shame"; attention is directed toward the girl's behavior, while the perpetrator's actions and the power imbalance within the relationship remain unexamined. For these reasons, childhood motherhood cannot be regarded merely as a side effect of poverty or of a lack of sexual education. It is often the end result of a life trajectory defined by violence and by a silence imposed in childhood. If social workers and policymakers fail to connect abuse and pregnancy, interventions will continue to address the „effect", namely motherhood, while the traumatic „cause" remains unaddressed. Recognizing sexual abuse as a core component of reproductive vulnerability is therefore a precondition for the effective protection of girls in marginalized communities.

## 6. The mechanisms of silence and normalization as tools of social exclusion

In vulnerable communities, silence is not merely the absence of communication; instead, it constitutes a complex survival mechanism and a form of conformity to group norms. When a minor becomes a mother, a „normalization of the invisible" often occurs, a reality misinterpreted by the community and even by some professionals through the distorted lens of „tradition" or „destiny." Such a culturalist perspective obscures the element of abuse and implicitly validates the control mechanisms exercised over young women (Bourdieu, 2001; Farmer, 2004). In communities marked by multi-generational poverty, this socio-cultural normalization causes juvenile motherhood to cease being perceived as a crisis. Instead, it becomes an inevitable backdrop to existence, drastically reducing the perceived urgency of political or social interventions (Zamfir et al., 2001).

This silence is sustained by a double social stigma: first, the adolescent is blamed for the „mistake" of the pregnancy, while secondly she is simultaneously being pressured to embrace the maternal role as her sole means of social legitimacy (Yardley, 2008). The fear of the group's reaction acts as a coercive force that

compels young women to mask their pregnancies, delaying access to essential prenatal care and increasing medical risks for both mother and newborn (WHO, 2024). Once caught in this cycle, a young woman effectively loses control over her own narrative, her body, and her future. In this context, the principal barrier to family planning is not the scarcity of medical services or contraception, but a rigid form of social gatekeeping: the community refuses to acknowledge the adolescent's sexual activity, preferring a „guilty silence" to an open confrontation with the problem.

This silence, however, is not solely the victim's burden; it is embedded in the very systems intended to protect her. Each unreported case of abuse functions as a form of collective assent to what Bourdieu (2001) termed symbolic violence. By choosing not to intervene, the community effectively shields the aggressor, while institutions lacking the instruments to reach these girls become passive participants in maintaining the status quo. Ultimately, the girl's voice is subordinated to a social pact that values the preservation of appearances more highly than a child's safety and fundamental rights.

## 7. Gender dynamics and financial dependency as mechanisms of familial oppression

Early motherhood in Romania does not emerge in a social vacuum; it actually sits at the convergence of systemic oppressive forces: chronic poverty, gender inequality, and control exerted within the family unit. Theoretically, this overlap of risks underscores the multidimensional nature of exclusion, highlighting how various social and economic barriers intertwine to drastically restrict the life options of young women (Crenshaw, 1989). In marginalized communities, poverty transcends the lack of material resources, becoming a structural barrier that facilitates the control exerted by authority figures over vulnerable adolescents.

This oppression is most evident in the economic dimension, where material precarity is transformed into a tool for domination and subordination. Young mothers often become entirely financially dependent on partners or extended family; this is a phenomenon that aligns with the „culture of poverty" and chronic dependency on social benefits (Zamfir et al., 2001). Academic literature points to a grave distortion in the management of these funds: although state allowances and childcare benefits are legally intended for the child's welfare, these resources are frequently seized or managed by dominant adults in the family, like parents, mothers-in-law, or partners (UNICEF, 2021).

This external „administration" of income strips the young mother of any negotiating power, forcing her to accept precarious living conditions or abusive behavior for fear of losing access to the bare minimum required for survival. This process, defined by Bourdieu (2001) as a form of symbolic violence and economic coercion, transforms financial resources from a social support mechanism into an instrument of familial discipline.

In this context, Romanian social policies face a major challenge: an excessive focus on monetary transfers at the expense of support services. As Zamfir (2021) emphasizes, focusing on financial benefits without a correlated investment in active social work tends to perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities rather than eliminate them, leaving vulnerable individuals trapped in a state of assisted dependency. In the absence of mechanisms for verifying whether the mother retains genuine decision-making power over her own life, the state intervenes without adequate information. Without concrete measures to protect a girl's right to self-determination, public intervention risks producing counterproductive effects, indirectly financing the very power dynamics that keep these young women subordinated and invisible. Public resources may thus end up subsidizing the structures that confine these mothers to a condition of permanent invisibility.

## 8. Power dynamics within the domestic sphere

In the context of early motherhood, the home, which should in principle constitute a protective space, frequently becomes the primary site of power dynamics and symbolic violence. This does not always involve physical force; more often, it takes the form of a subtle and insidious micro-management of daily life. Every detail of the young mother's existence is subject to scrutiny: whom she speaks to, when she is permitted to leave the house, and even how she cares for her child. These decisions are appropriated by the family network, depriving the adolescent of parental autonomy (Bourdieu, 2001). This erosion of the self under family authority is driven by a deep, culturally ingrained sense of guilt. As scholarly work shows, the „child-mother" does not only face external stigma; she also internalizes it through intra-family discourse. Repeatedly described as a financial „burden" or a „stain" on the family honor, she comes to regard silence and obedience as a means of atoning for her perceived fault (Yardley, 2008). This corresponds to what Erving Goffman (1963) described as the management of a „spoiled identity": the girl comes to accept external control not as abuse, but as the price of her „devalued" status.

Familial control thus acts as the final link that closes the circle initiated by structural poverty. The young mother's voice becomes inaudible, overshadowed by adult authority (parents, in-laws, or partners) who mediate all contact with the outside world. For social work professionals, this domestic barrier is extremely difficult to penetrate, as the adolescent's compliance is often mistaken for functional adaptation or adherence to local traditions (UNICEF, 2021). In reality, this domestic „harmony" masks a profound neglect of individual rights, transforming the private space into a site of isolation and the erasure of young girls' subjectivity.

## 9. The impact of school dropout on mechanisms of permanent exclusion

In the majority of cases analyzed, early pregnancy represents an often insurmountable barrier to the educational path. The available data indicate that only approximately 50% of adolescent mothers manage to complete high school by the age of 22 (UNICEF, 2021). Dropping out of school is rarely a genuine choice for these girls; it is, rather, a forced exit produced by two types of structural pressure. On the one hand, rural schools rarely provide support systems for pregnant students; instead of assistance, these girls are frequently marginalized by their peers and, at times, by their teachers. On the other hand, considerable pressure originates within the family itself: a girl's education is often the first resource to be sacrificed so that she can assume the role of full-time caregiver. This process aligns with the phenomenon defined in scholarly literature as the „feminization of poverty". This is understood as a disproportionately higher incidence of poverty among women, resulting from structural discrimination that limits access to resources, education, and long-term social benefits (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.).

## 10. Resilience *vs.* survival under coercion

A major risk in contemporary social work practice is the inappropriate or superficial application of the concept of „resilience". When support systems are absent or ineffective, the ability of young women to „carry on" under conditions of extreme poverty is often praised as a form of individual resilience, effectively masking what is actually a desperate strategy of passive survival. This perspective, centered on individual responsibility, absolves the state of its obligation to intervene, shifting the burden of adaptation exclusively onto the shoulders of the adolescent (Yardley, 2008).

In these contexts, resilience should not be confused with successful personal development; instead, it must be understood as „adaptation to adversity" (Lévesque & Chamberland, 2016). Research indicates that young women from backgrounds of abuse and poverty tend to accept existing conditions as an inescapable reality, adapting to a minimum level of functioning to cope with violence and material deprivation (Easterbrooks et al., 2011). This forced compliance is frequently misinterpreted by institutions as evidence of inner strength when, in reality, it reflects a diminished capacity to resist perpetrators and a drastic narrowing of one's horizons and expectations (Gyan et al., 2017).

Institutional indifference thus manifests through the absence of gender-sensitive policies that recognize a minor mother requires dual protection, both as a minor victim of structural circumstances and also as a mother embarking on a vulnerable parental journey. Although social support could theoretically act as a protective factor (Andrade et al., 2022), it remains insufficient in the absence of concrete material and educational resources.

Without systemic intervention targeting root causes, that are ranging from the lack of sexual education and precarious access to healthcare in rural areas to chronic economic inequalities, the concept of „resilience" remains merely a euphemism for resignation in the face of an existence defined by material restrictions. For resilience to be authentic, it must be supported by a state that does not merely observe survival but provides mechanisms for exiting the cycle of dependency (Weed et al., 2000). Otherwise, the „adaptation" of young mothers is nothing more than a continuation of the silence imposed by a society that has chosen to ignore the structural roots of their suffering.

## 11. Redefining social intervention: from crisis management to emancipatory practice

There is a persistent tension in Romania's social work system between the duty to protect and a rigid administrative culture that often overlooks the profound trauma experienced by these „child-mothers". At present, assistance is largely reactive, confined to the disbursement of financial benefits and the post-hoc monitoring of the child. Paradoxically, this model of welfare can reinforce the very oppressive family structures it is intended to counteract. Because state resources are frequently appropriated or administered by dominant family members, the intervention ceases to function as a means of support and becomes instead what Foucault (1978) called „biopower": a way of regulating life without ever interrupting the cycle of vulnerability (Bourdieu, 2001; Zamfir et al., 2001).

This situation is further aggravated by a legal paradox. While Law 272/2004 grants a degree of autonomy at the age of 16, girls below this age remain in a decisional vacuum, obliged to rely on legal guardians for access to even the most basic services. The consequence is that the state effectively delegates authority to the very families that failed to prevent the abuse in the first place. In doing so, the home ceases to function as a protective space and becomes, in practice, a site of coercion (Parlamentul României, 2026; UNICEF, 2021). Consequently, it is imperative to migrate toward a rights-based and empowerment-oriented practice that recognizes the adolescent as an active subject whose voice must be protected against communal pressure. Real reform requires the application of a „gender lens" capable of identifying the power imbalance between the minor and the dominant adult environment, while ensuring confidential access to reproductive health and removing barriers imposed by legal representatives (UNFPA, 2022; UNESCO, 2018). The social worker must evolve into an advocate, providing an active „shield" for the reconstruction of the young mother's dignity and the breaking of dependency on oppressive structures (Buzducea, 2010; Yardley, 2008). The effectiveness of this new model depends on the implementation of systemic interventions at two levels: a reform of sexual education that provides girls with the tools to identify abuse (WHO, 2024), and proactive monitoring based on close inter-institutional collaboration between schools, the police, and the medical system.

## 12. Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates that early motherhood in Romania is not merely a failure of family planning, but a direct consequence of invisible forms of violence that thrive on silence and institutional neglect. To break this cycle of vulnerability, a fundamental redefinition of the social worker's role is essential. This shift involves moving from a bureaucratic practice that is often based on rigid conformity or implicit moral judgment, toward a radical social work grounded in human rights and an authentic model of empowerment (Ife, 2012).

Such a transformation involves recognizing the adolescent not as a mere administrative „case," but as a subject of rights whose autonomy has been systematically confiscated. By abandoning a moralizing perspective and adopting an ethical rigor that prioritizes the minor's voice over familial or communal pressures, professionals can convert the critical moment of motherhood from a sentence of permanent exclusion into a starting point for the reconstruction of dignity. Ultimately, transforming social work into an „active shield" against oppression remains the only way Romanian society can ensure a dignified future for young girls, turning invisibility into presence and survival into emancipation.

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