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SUMMARY

PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

Roxana-Mihaela VASILIU[1]

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 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).

Graduates of tertiary education by sex and age (% aged 15-89, EU, 2022)
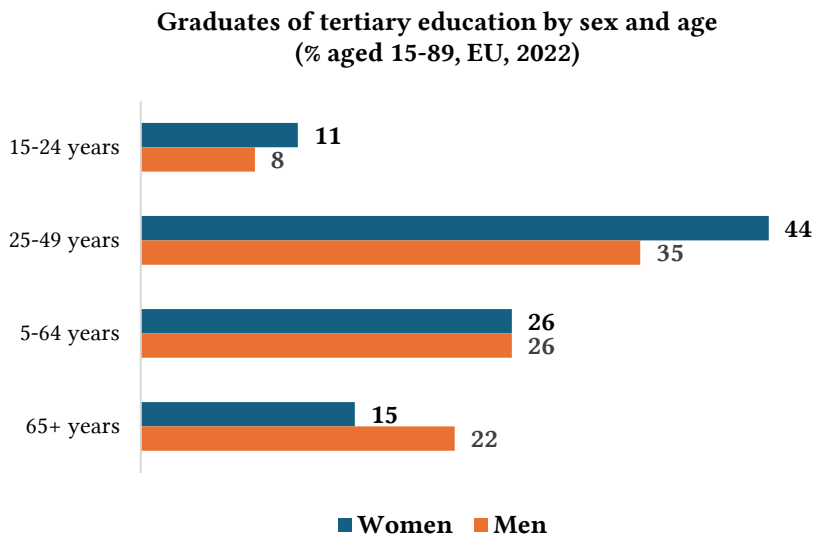
Figure 1. Authors' figure based on data from EIGE (2024) – "Gender Equality Index 2024" (p. 39)

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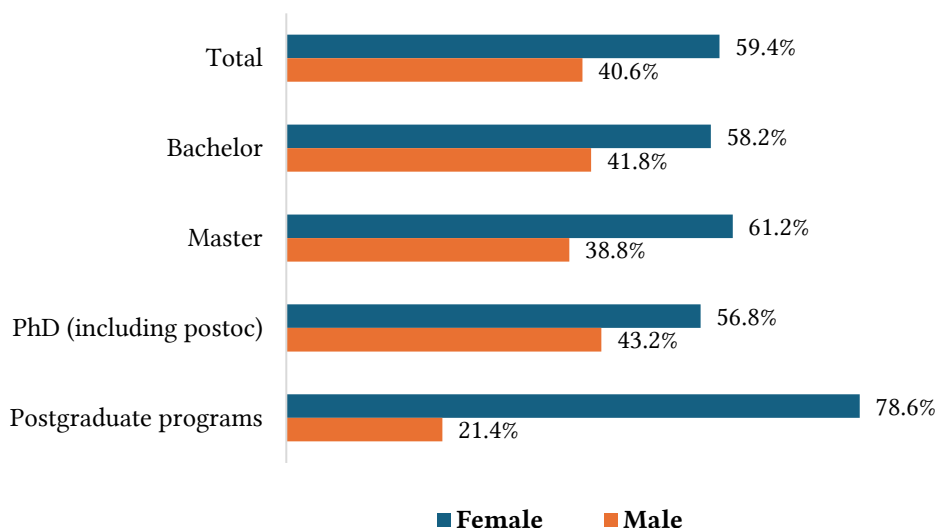
Figure 2. Authors' figure based on data from Ministry of Education (2024b) – "Report on the state of higher education in Romania 2023-2024" (p. 42)

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).

**Resident Population by Bachelor's degree
on 1st December 2021**
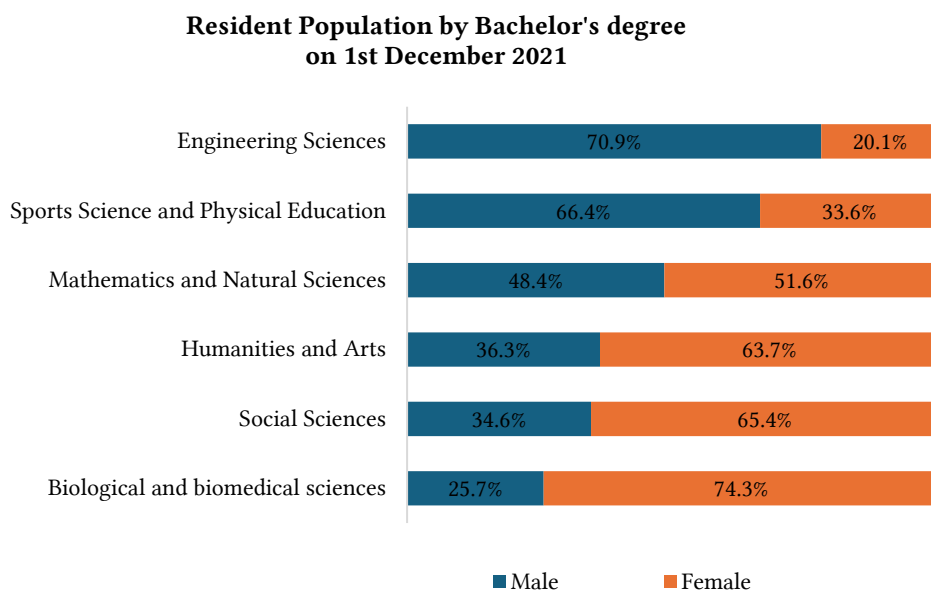
Figure 3. Authors' calculation and figure based on data from INS (2022) – "The 2021 Population and Housing Census"

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).

**"Employment rate of the working age population by
level of education and gender" - Romania, 2023**
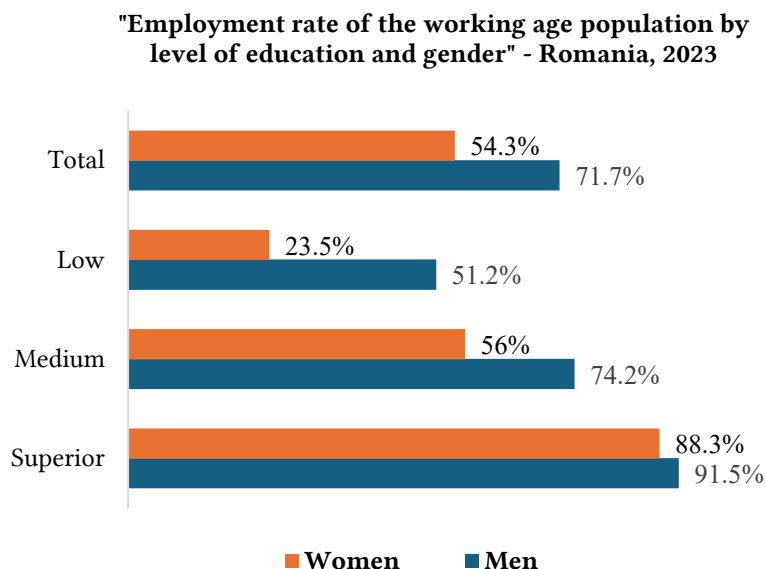
Figure 4. Author's figure based on data from INS (2024) – "Labour force in Romania:
employment and unemployment, 2023" (p. 31)

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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LIVED EXPERIENCE OF OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE IN ROMANIA: BIRTH, WOUNDED FLESH, AND THE POLITICS OF CONTROL

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Abstract: This article investigates obstetric violence in Romania as a systemic form of disciplining the female body within the context of medicalised childbirth. Through a phenomenological analysis of lived experience, based on 30 semi-structured interviews with women who gave birth in public and private institutions between 2019 and 2024, the research explores how obstetric abuse is experienced, narrated, and at times rationalised. The findings reveal a complex typology of obstetric violence—from non-consensual medical interventions and verbal abuse to subtle forms of abandonment, institutional silence, and symbolic expropriation. Birth emerges as an ambivalent space where the woman's body is both hyper-visible and stripped of agency, reduced to an object of medical expertise. Obstetric violence is not an anomaly, but a recurring expression of how the biomedical system governs femininity, pain, and bodily autonomy. The implications of these findings underscore the need for institutional reforms in maternity care, including the adoption of consent-based practices, relational forms of support, and respectful communication. Applications include improved training for medical personnel, the development of patient-centred care protocols, and the creation of accountability mechanisms that address the structural dimensions of mistreatment.

Keywords: obstetric violence, lived experience, phenomenology, femininity, bodily discipline, Romania.

Résumé : Cet article examine la violence obstétricale en Roumanie comme une forme systémique de discipline exercée sur le corps féminin dans le contexte de l'accouchement médicalisé. À travers une analyse phénoménologique de l'expérience vécue, fondée sur 30 entretiens semi-directifs menés auprès de femmes ayant accouché dans des établissements publics et privés entre 2019 et 2024, la recherche explore comment les abus obstétricaux sont vécus, racontés et parfois rationalisés. Les résultats mettent en évidence une typologie complexe de la violence obstétricale — allant d'interventions médicales non consenties et de violences verbales à des formes plus subtiles d'abandon, de silence institutionnel et d'expropriation symbolique. L'accouchement apparaît comme un espace ambivalent où le corps de la femme est à la fois hyper-visible et privé d'agentivité, réduit à un objet de savoir médical. La violence obstétricale n'est pas une anomalie, mais une expression récurrente de la manière dont le système biomédical régule la féminité, la douleur et l'autonomie corporelle. Les implications de ces résultats soulignent la nécessité de réformes institutionnelles dans les soins maternels, y compris des pratiques fondées sur le consentement, des formes de soutien relationnel et une communication respectueuse. Les

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applications incluent une meilleure formation du personnel médical, l'élaboration de protocoles de soins centrés sur la patiente, ainsi que la création de mécanismes de responsabilité visant les dimensions structurelles des mauvais traitements.

Mots-clés : violence obstétricale, expérience vécue, phénoménologie, féminité, discipline corporelle, Roumanie.

Rezumat: Acest articol investighează violența obstetrică din România ca formă sistemică de disciplinare a corpului feminin în contextul nașterii medicalizate. Printr-o analiză fenomenologică a experienței trăite, bazată pe 30 de interviuri semi-structurate cu femei care au născut în instituții publice și private între 2019 și 2024, cercetarea explorează modurile în care abuzul obstetric este trăit, narativizat și raționalizat. Rezultatele relevă o tipologie complexă a violenței obstetrice – de la intervenții medicale fără consimțământ și violență verbală, până la forme subtile de abandon, tăcere instituțională și expropriere simbolică. Nașterea apare ca un spațiu ambivalent în care corpul femeii este simultan hiper-vizibil și lipsit de agenție, redus la obiect de expertiză medicală. Violența obstetrică nu este un accident, ci o expresie recurentă a modului în care sistemul biomedical reglează feminitatea, durerea și autonomia corporală. Implicațiile acestor rezultate indică necesitatea unor reforme instituționale în îngrijirea maternă, incluzând practici bazate pe consimțământ, forme relaționale de sprijin și o comunicare respectuoasă. Aplicațiile vizează îmbunătățirea formării personalului medical, elaborarea unor protocoale de îngrijire centrate pe pacientă și crearea unor mecanisme de responsabilizare care să abordeze dimensiunile structurale ale abuzului.

Cuvinte-cheie: violență obstetrică, experiență trăită, fenomenologie, feminitate, disciplinare corporală, România.

1. Introduction

Obstetric violence is increasingly being recognised at an international level as a form of structural and symbolic violence embedded in the functioning of biomedical systems, especially in those marked by rigid hierarchies, paternalistic authority, and power relations that reproduce gender inequalities. Defined as "the appropriation of the body and reproductive processes of women by health personnel" (World Health Organisation, 2014), obstetric violence highlights the relational dimension and the power imbalance involved in medical interventions on the birthing body. Because it entails medical interventions on women's bodies without consent, often performed in ways that violate sexual integrity and erase agency, obstetric violence functions as a form of gender-based violence (Rusu, Nogueira & Topa, 2025). It is directed at specifically gendered bodies, operating through systems that naturalise subordination and silence. Far from being exceptional, this violence is often normalised: concealed by institutional logic, routinised through clinical procedures, and legitimised in the name of safety and professional authority (Annborn & Finnbogadóttir, 2022; Sadler et al., 2016). Although recent research has begun to outline obstetric violence more clearly as a systemic issue, most approaches focus either on legal and institutional aspects or on prevalence and public policy. Less attention has been paid to how this violence is lived, signified, and contested by women from within the experience of

childbirth. This research contributes to this field by placing lived experience at the centre of epistemological and political reflection, proposing a phenomenological analysis of feminine embodiment in obstetric contexts.

In this article, I explore obstetric violence as a phenomenon situated at the intersection of standardised medical intervention and cultural regimes of moralising the female body. By centring the narratives of birthing subjects, I analyse how childbirth in the Romanian healthcare system functions as a two-dimensional space – both physical and symbolic – of reinforcing control and discipline, elements specific to a patriarchal understanding of female bodily autonomy. I documented the *lived experiences* of 30 women, diverse in socio-demographic terms, who gave birth in medicalised spaces (public or private) in Romania over the past five years. Initially, the research aim was to identify the primary forms of obstetric violence experienced by these women and to understand the mechanisms through which such practices are reproduced and rendered normal. The focus was structural, as I was trained in a school of thought where miniature framings and immediate experiences are considered valuable only insofar as they can tell a coherent story about broader social structures. During the interviews, however, a type of knowledge emerged that structural explanations often suffocate: *suffering*. Even though it has a systemic origin, suffering is individual, bodily, and immediate. Thus, the goal of this research is not only descriptive, aimed at identifying patterns of abuse, but also interpretive: I propose a phenomenological and critical reading of how obstetric violence is embodied, narrated, justified, or contested in social contexts marked by gender hierarchies and medical paternalism.

Obstetric violence should not be understood merely as an expression of excessive medicalisation, but as an intersection between an institutional context and a cultural-moral one that normalises pain, submission, and silence as expressions of "proper" femininity. To decipher the structural context in which obstetric violence emerges, it is not enough to refer to the medicalisation of childbirth – that alchemy through which a profoundly bodily, relational, and transformative experience is transmuted into a sequence of standardised, quantifiable, and depersonalised procedures. The clinical redefinition of childbirth reactivates a regime of authority that reproduces gender hierarchies, in which the woman's body becomes both a site of medical intervention and an object of patriarchal normative control. Childbirth is understood as a moment of feminine duty, sacrifice, and conformity to social expectations of "good motherhood." In this register, the birthing body is not only medicalised but also moralised. Managing pain through non-assertion of space and vocal absence, along with the uncritical acceptance of medical interventions, even when perceived as abusive or mutilating, are valued as signs of maternal responsibility. Conversely, asserting autonomy and expressing suffering are perceived as transgressions of the implicit expectations surrounding how women are expected to behave in society. The birthing woman's "amplified," open, unpredictable, and visceral body is perceived as deviant from hegemonic norms of domesticated, silent, and controlled femininity (Cohen

Shabot, 2016). In this sense, childbirth becomes a scenario for reinscribing these norms: a moment in which female corporeality is "brought back to order," reintegrated into the socially acceptable limits of compliant femininity, even at the cost of suppressing the woman's subjective experience (Young, 2005).

2. Framing Obstetric Violence: Critical Perspectives

The topic of obstetric violence has gained discursive traction in recent years (Freedman & Kruk, 2014; Jewkes & Penn-Kekana, 2015; Ferrão et al., 2022). The explicit definition of this type of violence by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2014 represents a pivotal moment in the recognition of institutional forms of abuse and mistreatment that women may face during childbirth. While this definition represents an important and valuable step, it frames obstetric violence as a moral failure in the delivery of care, rather than as a constitutive feature of biomedical power. By presenting obstetric violence as a deviation from the normative standard of medical care, the WHO (2014) reproduces a functionalist understanding of medicine as a social institution. This perspective ultimately fails to interrogate the epistemological violence that underpins clinical authority.

Therefore, when studying the "microphysics of obstetric power" (Chadwick, 2018), it is important to avoid the epistemological trap of locating the source of violence in the "malevolent" intentions of individual medical staff. Obstetric, gynaecological, or neonatal violence emerges at the intersection of medical socialisation within a paternalistic and violent professional culture, one in which the patient is entirely subordinated to medical authority, intertwined with the reality of an underfunded, understaffed, and technologically strained healthcare system. To this, we must add the political and administrative levels that deliberately neglect the public healthcare sector while encouraging hybrid public-private entrepreneurial models.

Obstetric violence is not simply a deviation from an ideal standard of care; it is a systemic outcome of how modern obstetrics is structured to govern femininity. Drawing on Foucault's (1973) theories of biopolitics and discipline, we can understand the hospital not as a straightforward site of healing, but as a heterotopia – a space in which the body, regardless of gender or pathology, is extracted from its everyday context, stripped of subjectivity, and reduced to a procedural object of medical knowledge (Palaga, 2021). The medical gaze fragments the body into parts, symptoms, and metrics, erasing its social embeddedness (Lock & Scheper-Hughes, 1987). In obstetrics, this fragmentation becomes total: the labouring body ceases to be a fluid subject and is transformed into a clinical case (Duden, 1993; Martin, 2001). According to clinical discourse, childbirth is not enacted by the woman as an active subject, but rather treated as a procedure, as she is submitted to the expert supervision of medical knowledge.

The regulation of femininity extends beyond behaviour to include the very terms through which presence is allowed. In Western societies, women are socialised to minimise their presence – spatially, vocally, and emotionally (Young, 2005; Cohen Shabot, 2016). A "well-behaved" woman is discreet, manageable, and

quiet. The birthing body, however, defies all these expectations of feminine decorum: it is expansive, noisy, unpredictable, and openly challenges both the medical imperative of control and the patriarchal ideal of restrained, decorative femininity. Obstetric violence thus operates as a disciplinary apparatus that reacts to the expressive and agentic female body. When a woman screams, questions instructions, or demands information, she transgresses not only the internal logic of medical rationality but also the deeply embedded norms of passive femininity. The institutional response to this "disruptive" femininity is coercive: verbal humiliation, non-consensual procedures, and the systematic dismissal of requests. These mechanisms serve as technologies of re-feminisation, re-domesticating the unruly birthing body and repositioning the subject within socially acceptable and medically manageable forms (Davis-Floyd, 2003; Briggs, 2002; Roberts, 1997).

Recent studies across diverse healthcare systems confirm that obstetric violence is neither incidental nor restricted to under-resourced settings. In Spain, a national online survey conducted in 2019 with over 899 women found that 67.4% (606 of the women) had undergone unjustified medical interventions during childbirth (Martínez-Galiano et al., 2021). In Poland, a 2018 cross-sectional national study, based on self-reported data from 8.378 respondents, found that 81% of respondents experienced violence or abuse from medical staff on at least one occasion (Baranowska et al., 2019). In the United States, a 2022 national online survey carried out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed that 20% of birthing women felt coerced into medical decisions (CDC, 2023).

In Romania, a 2024 national survey conducted by the Association of Independent Midwives (Asociația Moașelor Independente) on 5.623 women showed that obstetric violence was most frequently reported in vaginal births, where 29.6% of women said they had endured one or more distinct forms of mistreatment. A striking 83.6% of respondents reported being denied the option to have a partner or support person present during labour and birth, suggesting a significant disregard for relational and emotional support in maternity care (Neaga, Grünberg & Radu, 2024). Additionally, 76.1% of women indicated that they were forced into specific birthing positions, reflecting a broader institutional tendency to prioritise medical control over bodily autonomy (idem). More than half (56.0%) experienced postnatal separation from their newborns, a practice known to affect bonding and breastfeeding negatively. Alarmingly, 45.3% of women reported being subjected to the Kristeller manoeuvre (fundal pressure with the elbow), a controversial and often painful intervention associated with increased risks (ibidem). Although the phenomenon is widespread, only 16.2% of women explicitly identified themselves as victims of obstetric violence, pointing to a high level of normalisation and low awareness of patients' rights (Neaga, Grünberg & Radu, 2024).

3. Methodological Design

The research is informed by a phenomenological methodology, which focuses on capturing and interpreting the lived, embodied experience of childbirth

from the perspective of the individual. Drawing on feminist phenomenology (Young, 2005; Cohen Shabot, 2016), this approach views the body not merely as a biological object but as a site of meaning, power, and social inscription. Phenomenology enables a shift from viewing obstetric violence as a set of discrete events to understanding it as an experience of violation felt through the flesh, narrated through memory, and shaped by social and institutional structures. This framework foregrounds the affective, relational, and temporal dimensions of the birthing experience, with particular attention to how violence is named or not named, justified or resisted.

The research raises three key questions: *(1) How do women in Romania articulate and make sense of their experiences of obstetric violence during medicalised childbirth?; (2) What institutional, discursive, and affective mechanisms contribute to the normalisation, invisibilisation, or justification of these forms of violence?* and *(3) In what ways do women resist, internalise, or reconfigure these experiences over time in their personal and social narratives?*. Building on these questions, the research aims to fulfil three core objectives: first, to document and categorise the diverse forms of obstetric violence as narrated by women who have given birth in both public and private medical institutions in Romania; second, to explore the socio-cultural and clinical logics through which these practices are legitimised and rendered routine; and third, to develop a phenomenological interpretation of how obstetric violence is embodied, silenced, or contested in contexts marked by gendered hierarchies and medical paternalism. This dual focus on structural critique and subjective experience enables a more nuanced understanding of how violence is both systemically produced and intimately experienced.

The empirical investigation was based on 30 in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted between May 2022 and July 2024. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. The interview guide was designed to foster a broad discussion on reproductive health and to allow participants to reconstruct their experiences of pregnancy and childbirth in their own words. It is important to mention that my interest in this subject is not grounded in an autoethnographic approach. My personal trajectory has not been shaped by the experience of motherhood, but rather by a reaction to the banality of obstetric violence that I encountered during my professional training as a nurse. It was during my clinical internship in obstetrics and gynaecology that I first came into contact with a routinised form of violence, embedded in clinical protocols and everyday doctor-patient interactions.

The structure of the interview guide was not centred on obstetric violence, but was instead situated within a narrative account of perinatal reproductive health, childbirth, and the postnatal period. The research instrument contained four analytical dimensions: reproductive sexual hygiene, medical planning of pregnancy, the experience of birth medicalisation, and the postnatal period, focusing on the retrospective evaluation of how reproductive health experiences were felt, interpreted, and re-evaluated over time. Moreover, the concept of "obstetric violence" was deliberately excluded from the interview in order to avoid

providing participants with a predefined conceptual framework of expression, and to allow for spontaneous articulations of discomfort, confusion, or abuse when such emerged.

Participant recruitment was conducted using the "snowball" method (Babbie, 2010), beginning with my personal and professional network and gradually expanding through informal recommendations. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) a recent (not before 2019) childbirth experience in a medicalised setting in Romania; (2) direct, embodied access to the experience of childbirth (only individuals who had themselves given birth were included, not partners, or medical professionals), and (3) contextual and experiential diversity – although not a formal exclusion criterion, I sought variation in terms of type of medical facility (public, private, university-affiliated), type of birth (spontaneous, induced, cesarean), parity (primiparous versus multiparous), and medical history (including high-risk pregnancies and premature births).

In the following section, I present the socio-demographic data of the interviewees in tabular form to offer a general overview of the diversity of profiles included in the research. The selected information does not aim for statistical representativeness but rather to contextualise the narrated experiences, in line with the qualitative approach centred on subjectivity (Iluț, 1997).

Table 1. Socio-Demographic, Obstetric, and Clinical Characteristics of Participants
($n = 30$)

Category	Subcategory	Number of participants ($n = 30$)
age	19–25 years	4
	26–35 years	18
	36+ years	8
place of residence	urban	22
	rural	8
education level	secondary education	9
	higher education	21
occupational status	public sector	10
	private sector	8
	unemployed	4
	student	3
	maternity leave	5
type of medical facility	public	20
	private	10
birth experience	primiparous	18
	multiparous	12
number of births	1 birth	18
	2 births	9
	3 + births	3
type of birth	spontaneous vaginal birth	9
	induced vaginal birth	8
	emergency C-section	5
	scheduled C-section	8

Category	Subcategory	Number of participants ($n = 30$)
relevant medical history	high-risk pregnancy	9
	premature birth	4
	no complications	17
obstetric violence (≥1 form)	YES	27
	NO	3

Out of the 30 women interviewed, 20 gave birth in public hospitals and 10 in private clinics. Eighteen participants became mothers for the first time, while twelve had at least one previous birth. Regarding the type of delivery, 12 participants gave birth naturally (spontaneous vaginal deliveries), 6 underwent induction, and twelve had cesarean sections (five scheduled, seven emergency). Nine participants were classified as having high-risk pregnancies, and four experienced premature births. I also considered the clinical setting (public or private) in order to explore how institutional culture affects medical discourse and practices.

The interviewed women were informed about the broader aims of the study, their rights, and the procedures in place to protect their identity, anonymity, and data confidentiality. Verbal consent for audio recording was obtained. After recording, the interviews were transcribed using transcription software. The data were coded and analysed in two stages, without the use of specialised software. In the first stage, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of obstetric violence, comparing the empirical data with the primary forms described in the literature. In the second stage, I applied a phenomenological lens, focusing on how the participants construct their narratives of labour, childbirth, and the immediate postnatal period (in the hospital). This analysis stage did not focus on the affective and performative textures of the women's discourse. Through this dual lens, which addresses both patterns and the lived experience of violence, I sought to produce a thick description (Geertz, 1973) that not only documents specific instances of obstetric abuse but also seeks to understand how this violence is embodied, silenced, internalised, or contested.

4. Results

Several key themes emerged (Figure 1) from the narratives of the women I interviewed, each tracing a particular mode through which obstetric violence is experienced, processed, or contested. One of the most recurrent was voicelessness – accounts in which participants were silenced, ignored, or mocked when attempting to express pain or ask questions. Closely tied to this was the disruption of bodily autonomy, as women described procedures performed without explanation, forewarning, or consent, reducing them to passive recipients of intervention. Some testimonies bore traces of symbolic violence through the use of derogatory language, comparisons with animals, or infantilising tones that undermined their status as adult, rational subjects. And yet, moments of resistance and reclamation also surfaced – instances where women challenged authority, refused procedures, or reasserted their agency. Finally, a subtler layer of experience

emerged in the form of ambiguity and rationalisation: many struggled to name what had happened to them, caught between recognising harm and justifying it as necessary, expected, or "how birth is."

These findings strongly resonate with recent international ethnographies (Chadwick, 2018; Pickles, 2023), demonstrating how violence is often normalised through repetition and silence. Frequently, women themselves interpret abuse not as a violation of bodily autonomy or the right to co-participation through consent, but as part of what is perceived to be the "natural" process of giving birth. This normalisation form operates as a discursive mechanism that obscures the birthing subject's agency and restricts – or entirely erases – the possibility of resistance. Therefore, contrary to the way the WHO (2014) frames obstetric violence as a breach of care standards, what is at stake is the reproduction of an ontological absence. This erasure is re-inscribed upon all bodies subjected to expert knowledge in the clinical space.
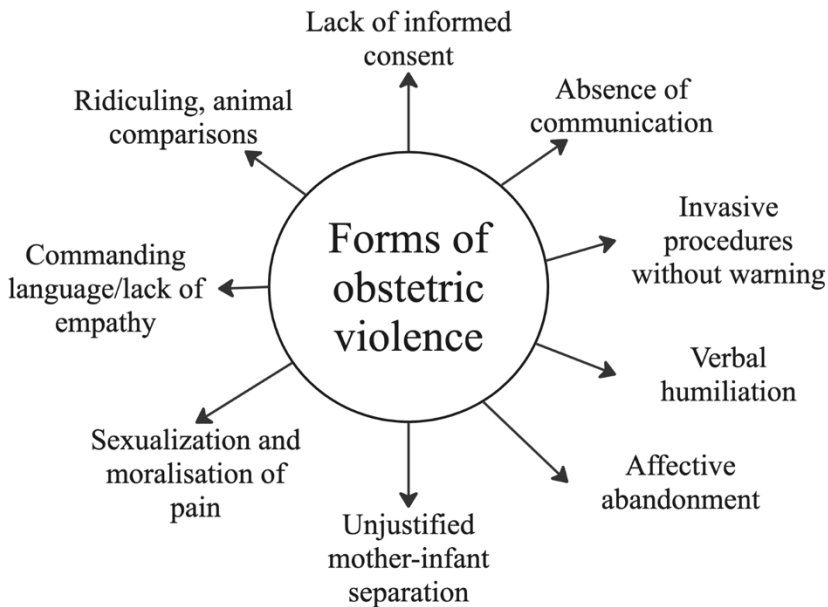
Figure 1. Typologies of Obstetric Violence: A Conceptual Mapping of Reported Practices. Source: author's elaboration based on interview data.

4.1. Silencing the "Loud" Feminine Body

One of the most pervasive forms of obstetric violence reported by participants was verbal aggression, often dismissed as clinical normalcy or rationalised as disciplinary intervention. These were not incidental slips of language, but performative acts of control, directed at bodies perceived as unruly. The voice of the birthing woman, especially when expressing pain, fear, or the need

for information, was framed as a disturbance that needed to be silenced. Expressions such as *"Did you scream like that when you made the baby?"* (R, 31 years old, public hospital birth) or *"You liked the sex, didn't you? Then shut up and take it now"* (A, 33 years old, public hospital birth) were not only dehumanising but reinscribed pain as something deserved, a form of punishment for female desire, agency, or voice. Pain was not merely dismissed; it was moralised, rendered a sign of weakness, guilt, or failure.

Voice, far from being received as a sign of presence, is treated as something to be managed, corrected, or neutralised. During labour, sound emerges not only as a reaction, but also in the clinical settings in which the interviewees gave birth; these gestures were repeatedly repositioned as inappropriate: *"Shut up! I do not want to hear you screaming! You are bursting our eardrums. I did not come to work to listen to your yelling"* (C, 21 years old, public hospital birth). The voice that carries pain, uncertainty, or fear is not heard as communication, but as disturbance, as failure to comply with an unspoken rule that pain must be orderly and quiet.

The expressive "loud" labouring body becomes something to be punished, not witnessed. Pain is not only invalidated, but reframed as shameful, as if the very act of vocalising suffering were a sign of weakness or moral deficit: *"They told me I should keep quiet, that others suffer more and do not make a fuss like I do"* (L, 26 years old, public hospital birth); *"(...) they told me that this is a clinic, and not a circus and that I should refrain screaming"* (I, 34 years old, public hospital birth). In the clinical space, there is limited tolerance for rawness, for being undone or for asking aloud what is happening or begging for someone to stay: *"The supervising nurse said I was being dramatic, that I was embarrassing myself and that I needed to stop making a scene"* (F, 28 years old, private hospital birth). Even when expression takes the form of sobbing or breathless silence, the body is not met with reassurance, but with avoidance, delay, or irritation: *"I was rocking back and forth, crying with everything I had left. My legs were shaking, and all they* (the medical staff, n.n.) *told me to stay still and stop exaggerating, that other women give birth without making a scene. I just broke down crying (...) It felt like I was bothering them by existing"* (E, 37 years old, public hospital birth).

The experience of being spoken to without being addressed, of being present but not received, forms a layer of violence that does not leave bruises but accumulates inward. At the intersection of bodily intensity and institutional silence, meaning begins to fray: *"Maybe I was too sensitive. Maybe I really did exaggerate"* (F, 28 years old, private hospital birth); *"I started to think I was going mad, because I kept begging for help and nobody even looked at me"* (E, 37 years old, public hospital birth). The voice, having failed to bring someone closer, becomes heavy, then folds inward. Instead of asking again, the body withdraws, not because the pain has stopped, but because the invitation to speak has collapsed.

When voice is punished for existing, it becomes impossible to trust its own urgency. Nevertheless, where silencing leaves rupture, women speak of what could have been — not in abstract terms, but through the memory of those who stayed: *"I was lucky. The midwife who assisted me was a kind woman. She kept saying, 'Come*

on, mama, you are strong. Do not give up now.' Honestly, when you are in there and feel like you cannot go on, a kind word is worth more than any medicine. Some nurses were angels on earth. Others... it was like they were just there to get the job done. The midwife who helped me, God, that woman was like a mother to me. She held my hand, whispered that I should not panic, and explained everything. Without her, I would have fallen apart" (M, 27 years old, public hospital birth). What endures in memory is rarely the clinical intervention itself, but rather the hand that remained, the whisper that soothed, and the sense that someone chose to stay. In the space where violence has taught silence, care begins with the simple, radical act of addressing the person who is still there.

4.2. Medicalised Control and the Rupture of Bodily Agency

Obstetric violence is often experienced not as a singular rupture but as a gradual stripping away of agency, enacted through procedures that arrive without explanation, bodily incursions that take place without pause, and gestures that leave behind confusion rather than clarity. Narratives of care-as-command fill the space where dialogue should have been, and in that absence, what remains is the feeling of being acted upon, of being handled rather than held: *"I was put in a wheelchair and taken for what they said was the delivery of the placenta. But they raised me on the table, and I felt them doing something inside me. I asked, 'What are you doing?' and the answer was, 'We are doing a curettage.' They had not told me. Even today, no one has explained why. It does not even show up in my discharge papers"* (O, 36 years old, public hospital birth). In this clinical choreography, consent was neither withdrawn nor explicitly invited.

The laboring body becomes a site of rehearsed interventions that rarely pause for creating a trust relation: *"They brought me up on the table again and again. They even brought five students to check me (…). Nobody asked if I was okay with that"* (D, 28 years old, public hospital birth). What is remembered is not the procedure itself, but the sensation of being open, exposed, turned into something that could be touched and observed without acknowledgement. Medical authority, rather than entering into communication, arrived as a sequence of actions without explanation. *"They told me nothing. I felt something cold and just heard, 'We need to cut you.' I had no time to process, to ask or to refuse"* (R, 31 years old, public hospital birth). The body, made visible through technique, was simultaneously erased as a subject of experience. It was measured, stitched, examined, but never addressed, while care is unfolded like a script where time moved forward but meaning did not accumulate: *"I woke up from the anaesthesia in unbearable pain. I was not even given a painkiller. For 48 hours, I was in agony, and no one came to check on me for hours in a row"* (I, 34 years old, public hospital birth).

The women did not speak of these events as isolated incidents. What unsettled them was often not the act itself, but the way it was carried out (the sequence of movements, the routine, the impersonal flow that stripped the moment of care or consent): *"I was left alone in the operating room after the C-section. The doctors left. Two nurses stayed behind, looking at me and wondering what to do,*

because they were not sure if they could move me by themselves. It was like I was a weight, not an actual person in need of care" (O, 36 years old, public hospital birth). What takes shape across these narratives is not simply the failure to inform, but the systematic erasure of the subject as someone who might refuse, who might say no, who might need time to understand what is being done. The rupture is not only physical, but temporal and moral, perceived as dislocations from one's own body in a moment that should have demanded presence and care. Where communication was absent, interpretation became impossible: *"I did not understand what was happening. Even though it was my second birth, the pain and the way I was treated made everything feel alien. I felt like I had to figure it out on my own"* (A, 33 years old, public hospital birth). The loss of control was not only about the procedures themselves, but about not knowing when something would be done, why it was needed, or whether anyone thought to ask what she wanted. What was fractured was not just trust in the system, but the coherence of the experience itself.

4.3. Abandonment as Affective and Temporal Violence

Abandonment is not defined by what is done, but by what is withheld. In the delivery room, abandonment emerges not through visible aggression, but through absence of words, of gestures or recognition. The experience of being left alone while in pain, of not being seen or responded to, does not appear as a moment of neutrality but as an active form of violence, one that stretches over time, alters bodily perception, and breaks continuity with the self.

Time, when unaccompanied, ceases to move coherently: *"I was left alone in the ward, shaking with cold and in shock. I did not understand what was happening to me. I felt like crying, but I was too exhausted to feel anything clearly"* (D, 28 years old, public hospital birth). This loss of orientation is not only disempowering; it fractures the birth experience from within. There is no indication of how long it will last, nor is anyone explaining what is happening or when someone will return. The absence of presence not only delays care, but it also corrodes meaning. "*I kept asking if it was normal to hurt that much, and the nurse just said, 'It is normal. You will manage.' She did not even look at me, I swear to God (…)"* (S, 31 years old, public hospital birth) The question was not met with reassurance or explanation, but with a flat imperative to endure. The denial of response is never simply a procedural matter. Still, it communicates that the person in pain is not someone who needs to be with. Still, someone who needs to be managed or ignored: "*I gave birth, and they left me in the room without saying anything. I did not know if I had torn, if everything was okay. Nobody told me anything. They just walked out"* (N, 29 years old, public hospital birth). The silence does not feel like an absence; instead, it gathers weight, becoming dense with fear, with shame, and with the unsettling realisation that the experience unfolding no longer belongs to the person living through it, but seems instead to be claimed and directed by others.

The feeling of being abandoned does not come from one moment, but from an entire atmosphere in which care seems to have withdrawn its gaze: *"I asked them to close the window after birth because I was trembling all over and sensitive to*

cold, but they said, 'That is how it has to be, for ventilation.' I lay there shaking for hours and got sick after two days" (L, 26 years old, public hospital birth). The refusal to respond to suffering is not about clinical justification. It is about the distance created when bodies are treated as tasks and subjects disappear behind them. Where care becomes impersonal, even mechanical, presence takes on the form of exposure without relation: "*They took the baby to another ward, and when I asked how he was doing, nobody told me anything. I waited all night for someone to bring him back. The next morning, a nurse told me, 'What, you got scared and left him with us?' as if I had abandoned him, when it was their decision"* (S, 31 years old, public hospital birth). What remains from this moment is not just silence, but how silence is followed by blame. The question is never whether the patient was left alone, but why she did not behave better in the face of being alone.

In these accounts, abandonment is not equivalent to a lack of resources. It is felt as a withdrawal of recognition, a disappearance of relation: "*I gave birth and I was so tired, I could not move. I was left to figure it all out on my own. Nobody came. I did not even know where the call button was"* (T, 41 years old, public hospital birth). Clinical space becomes a space of waiting, not for labour to end, but for someone to see that labour is not over just because the body has expelled the child. This form of violence operates not through action but through non-response, unfolding as a temporal dislocation, where moments that should have been contained, held, and accompanied are stretched out. It is in these stretched-out moments that women begin to question whether they have the right to ask for anything at all.

When there is no genuine sense of connection, when no one is truly present to see or hear what is unfolding, time begins to lose its rhythm. It no longer moves forward in a steady flow, but thickens and coagulates, making the experience of birth difficult to recount. This difficulty is not due to a lack of intensity; on the contrary, the sensations are vivid and often overwhelming. What becomes elusive is the meaning of those sensations, because meaning does not arise in isolation. It takes shape through the presence of another, through a response that confirms and reflects the experience. In the absence of that response, the pain does not become less real; instead, it becomes harder to place and harder to hold within a coherent narrative. What remains are fragments: moments, impressions, bodily memories that linger long after the hospital stay has ended, carried quietly in the body as unspoken traces of something that was never fully witnessed.

5. Conclusion

Obstetric violence is not an anomaly. It is a patterned, systemic expression of how institutional medicine governs the birthing body through language, silence, gesture, and withdrawal. This research seeks not only to trace the external manifestations of violence but also the internal labour that women undertake to make sense of what has been done to them, often without consent, recognition, or apology. The narratives gathered in this study are not uniform. Some are punctuated by moments of acute rupture: physical or verbal acts that clearly crossed a threshold of harm. Others reveal more ambiguous forms of violence:

abandonment, condescension or erasure. What binds them together is not the intensity of the act, but the structure of power beneath it, that renders women's voices optional, their bodies procedural, and their suffering tolerable within the metrics of institutional care.

Obstetric violence reveals a paradox at the heart of biomedical care: birth, in its raw, chaotic, expressive form, destabilises the norms of both medical rationality and patriarchal femininity. The labouring body bleeds, screams, and demands, while refusing containment, and precisely because of this excess, it is corrected, silenced, sutured and brought back into compliance. This shows that this form of abuse is not merely a failure of bedside manner or professional ethics, but the result of a deeper ontological framework, in which the labouring woman is positioned as both hyper-visible and radically absent. The body is monitored, measured, and corrected, while presence is reduced to function, and visibility does not ensure recognition. Subjectivity is stripped away, leaving only a clinical object to be managed within institutional logics.

This research does not offer closure. It offers testimony, trace, and refusal. The women who shared their stories did not all identify as victims: some resisted, some rationalised, and others endured. Their narratives reflect the ambivalent terrain of embodied power, where violence and care are often inseparable, harm is inflicted in the name of help, and survival requires both silence and speech. Future research could further explore the affective afterlife of obstetric violence: how women narrate, suppress, or reconfigure these experiences over time, and how such memories impact maternal identity, trust in healthcare, and intergenerational transmission of medical anxiety. Anthropology can contribute to this reimagination, not by standing outside of suffering but by walking alongside it, bearing witness to what has not been named, and insisting that what has been normalised must no longer be accepted.

What is needed is not merely further research, but a collective public reckoning with the systems and values that have allowed obstetric violence to persist and remain largely unspoken. The narratives gathered in this study do not merely require analysis or theorisation; they demand recognition, responsibility, and action. They highlight the urgent need for institutional accountability, structural transformation, and the development of care practices grounded in relational ethics, bodily autonomy, and human dignity. To address obstetric violence is to reconfigure not only the clinical management of birth, but the very ways in which care is imagined, authority is enacted, and voices are acknowledged. This is not simply a matter of improving communication or bedside manners. It is a matter of justice, of whose pain is allowed to be visible, whose suffering is allowed to matter, and whose experience is allowed to reshape the world of care.

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REPRODUCTIVE INEQUALITY IN ROMANIA: DISPARITIES IN INFORMATION, MEDICAL ACCESS, AND STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY

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Abstract: This study investigates the structural roots of reproductive inequality in Romania, focusing on adolescent motherhood, unequal access to healthcare, and limitations in sexual education. Despite being part of the European Union, Romania ranks among the highest in adolescent birth rates, especially among girls under 15. Using official statistics, the study identifies regional disparities in adolescent fertility, strongly correlated with poverty and marginalization. Employing a structuralist lens informed by Bourdieu and Foucault, the research challenges the notion that early motherhood results from individual choice, arguing instead that it reflects constrained agency shaped by socioeconomic deprivation, inadequate sex education, and a fragmented healthcare system. The study also reveals severe limitations in access to abortion and contraception, particularly for vulnerable groups, despite formal legal provisions. Medical practices such as high caesarean rates and stillbirths further illustrate healthcare inequalities. The findings point to a biopolitical regime where institutional inaction and normative control perpetuate reproductive injustices. The paper calls for comprehensive public policy interventions that address both structural barriers and institutional responsibilities to ensure reproductive rights and equity for all Romanian women.

Keywords: reproductive inequalities, adolescent motherhood, sex education, inequality, Romania.

Résumé : Cette étude explore les racines structurelles des inégalités reproductives en Roumanie, en se concentrant sur la maternité chez les adolescentes, l'accès inégal aux soins médicaux et les limites de l'éducation sexuelle. Bien que membre de l'Union européenne, la Roumanie affiche l'un des taux les plus élevés de naissances chez les adolescentes, en particulier chez les filles de moins de 15 ans. À partir de données statistiques officielles, l'étude met en évidence des disparités régionales étroitement liées à la pauvreté et à la marginalisation. En mobilisant un cadre théorique inspiré de Bourdieu et Foucault, la recherche remet en question l'idée que la maternité précoce relève du seul choix individuel, et montre qu'elle est conditionnée par des contraintes socioéconomiques, un accès limité à

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l'éducation sexuelle et un système de santé inégalitaire. Le travail révèle également de fortes restrictions en matière d'accès à l'avortement et à la contraception, malgré un cadre légal favorable. Des pratiques médicales telles que la fréquence élevée des césariennes et le taux de mortinatalité illustrent les inégalités de soins. L'analyse conclut à un régime biopolitique où l'inaction institutionnelle et le contrôle normatif entretiennent les injustices reproductives. L'étude appelle à des politiques publiques cohérentes, garantissant les droits reproductifs de toutes les femmes en Roumanie.

Mots-clés : inégalités reproductives, maternité adolescente, éducation sexuelle, inégalité, Roumanie.

Rezumat: Acest studiu investighează rădăcinile structurale ale inegalității reproductive în România, concentrându-se asupra maternității în rândul adolescentelor, accesului inegal la servicii medicale și limitărilor educației sexuale. Deși face parte din Uniunea Europeană, România se află printre țările cu cele mai ridicate rate de nașteri în rândul adolescentelor, în special în cazul fetelor sub 15 ani. Folosind statistici oficiale, studiul identifică disparități regionale în fertilitatea adolescentelor, corelate strâns cu sărăcia și marginalizarea. Printr-o perspectivă structuralistă inspirată de Bourdieu și Foucault, cercetarea contestă ideea că maternitatea timpurie este rezultatul alegerii individuale, argumentând că aceasta reflectă o autonomie constrânsă, modelată de inegalități socio-economice, educație sexuală deficitară și un sistem de sănătate fragmentat. Studiul evidențiază și limitările severe în accesul la avort și contracepție. Practicile medicale, precum frecvența ridicată a cezarianelor și rata nașterilor de copii morți, indică, de asemenea, inegalități în îngrijirea medicală. Analiza sugerează existența unui regim biopolitic în care lipsa de acțiune instituțională și controlul normativ perpetuează injustițiile reproductive. Lucrarea susține necesitatea unor politici publice integrate, care să abordeze atât barierele structurale, cât și responsabilitățile instituționale în garantarea drepturilor reproductive pentru toate femeile din România.

Cuvinte-cheie: inegalități reproductive, maternitate adolescentină, educație sexuală, inegalitate, România.

1. Introduction

Reproductive health is among the key priorities on the international development agenda, being included in the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). This issue is directly connected to state development, as well as to women's rights and emancipation This research examines reproductive and gender inequalities in Romania, focusing on two analytical elements. We initially analyse the variations in adolescent fertility concerning geography and temporal factors. Considering Romania's consistent top ranking among EU nations in the incidence of live births to extremely young mothers, the issue is highly relevant. Romania notably exhibits the greatest number of births among women aged 10 to 14 and 15 to 19. A concerning data that underscores the severity of the issue for Romanian society reveals that in 2023, 42 percent of all children born to adolescent mothers (ages 10-14) in the European Union were born in Romania (Eurostat, n.d.).

The second analytical dimension is dedicated to the discussion on sexual and reproductive education, as well as medical practices and indicators associated

with the direct or indirect effects that medicalisation has on female patients. We began with the current legislation on sexual education in schools and proceeded with an analysis of official data on the number of abortions, caesarean births, and stillbirth rates. By using these indicators, we believe we have managed to provide a comprehensive overview of reproductive and gender inequalities in Romania. The analytical lens we employed was a structuralist one, through which we sought to demonstrate that individual actions are not entirely the result of rational decision-making. Rather, they are the outcome of independent social structures that control and shape individual action (Bourdieu, 1980).

Our study was guided by two research questions. Aware of the high incidence of adolescent fertility in Romania, as reflected in official statistics, our first aim was to highlight the regional and temporal disparities in the incidence of births among girls under the age of 15 and those aged between 15 and 19. Drawing on several studies that document regional disparities in living conditions, economic development, and marginalisation, we sought to overlap these two realities: on the one hand, that of adolescent motherhood, and on the other, that of Romania's unequal economic development. We demonstrated a strong correlation between the two.

Our second research question focused on capturing another structurally determined facet of reproductive inequalities. We aimed to show how education and medicalisation, through systemic dysfunctions, generate inequalities in women's reproductive rights, specifically in their ability to make informed choices and in access to healthcare services intended to ensure physical and emotional wellbeing.

What follows is the conceptual framework of this study and a review of the relevant literature. This section is followed by a chapter outlining the methodology employed. The next part of the paper presents the results of the analysis of official data regarding the territorial distribution of births among adolescent mothers in Romania. In the same section, we examine the evolution in Romania of key indicators such as the frequency of abortions, the intensity of stillbirths, and the rate of caesarean deliveries. Finally, we outline the limitations and main conclusions of our study.

2. Theoretical framework

Adolescent motherhood in Romania remains one of the most acute forms of reproductive inequality in contemporary Europe (Dinu, 2022; Eurostat, n.d.; LeMasters, et al., 2019). Some discourses approach adolescent motherhood either as a straightforward public health issue or as the result of poor individual choices, while others downplay it entirely, regarding it as quantitatively irrelevant on the grounds that, in absolute terms, it does not affect a sufficiently large segment of the population (Iorga et al., 2021). A sociological reading, however, reveals much deeper roots, embedded in unequal social structures and normative regimes of control over young women's bodies. In this paper, we place the phenomenon in theoretical dialogue between Pierre Bourdieu's structuralist constructivism and

Michel Foucault's biopolitical analysis, complemented by critical literature on social policy, sexual education, access to contraception, and poverty.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice provides a fundamental analytical framework for understanding how adolescent motherhood is shaped not only by macrostructural forces but also by the internalised dispositions and everyday experiences of young women. Habitus, as a set of socially acquired schemes of perception and action, is particularly relevant for capturing how life trajectories become structured by social origin, access to education, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990). In many of Romania's marginalised regions, early motherhood is not necessarily the result of misinformation or of 'poor' individual choices. Rather, it emerges as part of a socially constructed life path, where limited access to reproductive healthcare, low-quality education and persistent gender norms converge to shape both the material and symbolic conditions of reproductive life (LeMasters, et al., 2019; Magyari-Vincze, 2006; Neculau et al., 2022, Nanu et al., 2021). In such contexts, reproductive autonomy is severely constrained: choices are made within a narrow horizon of possibilities, and early motherhood may become a socially accepted or even expected solution (Neculau et al., 2022).

Simultaneously, Bourdieu's concept of field invites us to investigate the institutional spaces within which decisions regarding reproductive lives are negotiated. The Romanian healthcare system, with its unequal distribution of services and often arbitrary practices, functions as a reproductive field in which symbolic and material resources are distributed unequally (Magyari-Vincze, 2006; Palaga, 2021). Young women with high social and cultural capital are more likely to receive support and enjoy greater autonomy in making reproductive decisions, while adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds face numerous barriers stigmatising doctors to the absence of sexual education or accessible contraception (Plan International, 2024).

This structural reading finds a valuable complement in Foucault's theory of biopolitics. Biopower refers to the way in which the modern state exercises power not through prohibition or repression, but through the regulation and administration of life (Foucault, 1978). In Romania, reproductive policies and the state's failure to ensure universal access to comprehensive sexual education and family planning reveal a selective logic of biopolitical investment. Rather than guaranteeing equitable reproductive conditions for all citizens, the state shifts responsibility to families or non-governmental organisations, withdrawing from its role as guarantor of rights (Plan International, 2024). In Foucauldian terms, this absence is not neutral, but constitutes an active form of exclusion, a mechanism through which decisions are made about who is deemed worthy of support and who is left outside the scope of state concern (Gordon, 1997).

Equally important is the dimension of poverty, both as a determinant and because of adolescent motherhood (Oke, 2010). Studies show that teenage pregnancies are significantly more common in regions with high rates of relative poverty, low levels of schooling, and chronic social exclusion (Neculau et al., 2022). Poverty can be understood not merely as a lack of material resources, but as an

absence of the freedom to lead a life one has reason to value (Sen et al, 1993). The theoretical dialogue between Bourdieu and Foucault becomes particularly illuminating when we analyse access to abortion in Romania. Although legal, abortion is increasingly difficult to access. This reflects a symbolic economy of reproductive respectability, in which certain categories of women are morally discredited and excluded from the legitimacy of decision-making (IPPF Europe, 2023). From a Foucauldian viewpoint, we are witnessing a sophisticated form of control: not through explicit prohibition, but through institutional inaction and the delegation of power to moral and religious norms (Gordon, 1997).

In conclusion, placing Bourdieu and Foucault in theoretical dialogue allows us to move beyond the classical dichotomy between structure and agency, and to reveal that adolescent motherhood in Romania is not merely a demographic indicator, but a concentrated expression of social inequality. While Bourdieu shows us how social hierarchies are reproduced through bodily and symbolic practices, Foucault exposes the institutional logic of differentiated governance. Together, these perspectives enable us to reframe adolescent motherhood as a site where social injustice is naturalised, medicalised, and depoliticised, except in those cases where it is critically interrogated and challenged through transformative public policies. This view is in line with scholarly contributions that reconceptualise adolescent motherhood not as a pathological deviation but as a site of embodied social injustice maintained through medicalisation and bureaucratic depoliticization (SmithBattle, 2013; Arai, 2009; Pillow, 2004).

2.1. Poverty and Spatial Inequality in Romania

Hagenaars and de Vos (1988) propose three types of poverty. Absolute poverty refers to an individual's capacity to meet the fundamental necessities of life, such as having adequate shelter, access to nutrition that meets at least the minimum required caloric intake, and proper healthcare services. Relative poverty compares an individual's situation with that of others in order to capture the actual level of material satisfaction (Weziak-Bialowolska and Dijkstra, 2014). The third form of poverty is self-perceived poverty, which is based on individuals' subjective assessment of their material condition and whether they consider themselves to be living in hardship (Betti et al., 2001).

According to official data published by the National Institute of Statistics, the age group 0−17 consistently records the highest relative poverty rates over time. This observation indicates that younger individuals are most frequently affected by poverty, often living in vulnerable contexts such as precarious socio-economic conditions, which have serious implications for their standard of living, educational attainment, labour market opportunities, and overall life trajectory (UNICEF, 2012). The relative poverty rate among young people reached 33.3 percent in 2008, experienced a significant increase to 39.3 percent in 2014, and subsequently began to decline. In 2022, 27 percent of young people in Romania were below the relative poverty threshold. The other age categories, adults (18−64

years) and the elderly (65 and over), registered values ranging between 14.4 percent and 26.5 percent over the period 2008–2022 (INS, n.d.).

Considering the variation in relative poverty rates by sex, official data show that women are consistently the group most affected. One in five Romanians faces relative poverty, 30 percent of the total population cannot afford the necessities for an adequate standard of living, and over 42 percent of the population is at risk of falling into poverty or social exclusion (World Bank, 2016). The "Atlas of Marginalised Rural Areas" (Teşliuc et al., 2016) and the "Atlas of Marginalised Urban Areas in Romania" (Swinkels et al., 2013) are tools used to identify and target poor areas. One third (34%) of the population in marginalised rural areas are children (aged 0 to 17), compared to 22 percent in non-marginalised communities (Teşliuc et al., 2016).

Urban regions classified as marginalised are those that have accumulated disadvantages in housing, employment, and human capital. These are typically poor, socially isolated intra-urban communities that are not captured in official poverty statistics, which are calculated at municipal or county levels. As true pockets of social exclusion, marginalised neighbourhoods concentrate people with low levels of human capital, poor housing conditions, and low employment rates. Families living in these areas have limited or virtually no access to quality services (healthcare, infrastructure, education), reside in poorly constructed buildings or slum-like conditions and are vulnerable to area-specific forms of crime (Swinkels et al, 2013).

2.2. Sexual Education and Contraception in Romania

Sexual education can be defined as a learning experience aimed at promoting healthy sexual behaviour. Its content may vary – for instance, it can focus on abstinence from sexual activity or take the form of a comprehensive curriculum covering all aspects of sexual and reproductive health (Garcia & Fields, 2017). Pupils who receive comprehensive sexual education are more likely to delay the onset of sexual activity and to use contraceptive methods (Bourke et al., 2014). By contrast, abstinence-only programmes have shown no significant impact on delaying sexual debut or reducing associated risks (Santelli et al., 2017). Countries such as Finland and Sweden have implemented mandatory sexual education programmes (Parker et al., 2009) and report among the lowest adolescent fertility rates (World Bank, n.d.). At the opposite end of the spectrum are Bulgaria and Romania, countries that do not prioritise the necessity or mandatory nature of sexual education (Parker et al., 2009). This neglect has serious consequences, as both countries rank at the top in terms of high adolescent fertility rates.

Contraception is the act of preventing pregnancy, whether through a device, medical procedure, form of medication or internalised behaviour. Among the most used modern contraceptive methods are condoms, oral contraceptives, intrauterine devices (IUDs), vaginal rings, implants, and both male and female sterilisation. Traditional methods such as the calendar method and withdrawal are also still in use. Modern contraceptive methods enable women to have control over

their own bodies and to actively participate in family planning (United Nations, 2015). Access to contraception is vital for preventing adolescent pregnancies (Robbins and Ott, 2017). The use of long-term contraceptive methods is the most effective means of preventing pregnancy among minors (Robbins and Ott, 2017).

An important indicator for measuring contraceptive use is the contraceptive prevalence rate. It also serves as an indicator of a country's level of development, population dynamics, health, and the emancipation of women (UNFPA, 2018). Access to contraception is correlated with higher levels of education (World Bank, 2010). It is also a clear reflection of the availability – or lack thereof – of reproductive health services, which are essential for achieving several development goals related to maternal health, HIV/AIDS, and infant mortality. The prevalence of contraception is directly influenced by access to contraceptive methods and to information on sexual and reproductive health, both of which are governed by social structures (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The state regulates access to contraception directly through legislation, and this access may also be restricted indirectly by socio-economic and cultural factors (Neculau et al., 2022).

2.3. Politics of Abortion Access

The political regime changes of December 1989 led to the repeal of Decrees 770 and 441 and the legalisation of abortion on request during the first three months of pregnancy, as stipulated in Article 8 of Law 1/27.12.1989 (Parliament of Romania, 1989). Article 185 was reintroduced into the Penal Code to criminalise the termination of pregnancy after the legal limit and to regulate the conditions under which abortion may be performed – in medical institutions and by specialised personnel (Apostol, 2012). Decree 770 of 1966 marked a turning point in women's rights. It imposed strict and highly limiting conditions on the performance of abortions (Apostol, 2012). Decree 441, issued in 1985, further restricted abortion access, leaving women with empirically induced abortion as the only available method of fertility control – an approach that led to an increase in maternal mortality (Klingman, 2000).

Globally, adolescents account for 11 percent of all pregnancies, but 23 percent of these are associated with medical complications during gestation or delivery (Kennedy et al., 2011). Among adolescents aged 10–14, the risk of death due to pregnancy or childbirth complications is five times higher than among adult women, and maternal conditions are the leading cause of death among girls aged 15–19 (World Health Organization, 2006; 2008; Patton et al., 2009). Preventing adolescent pregnancies is crucial for any agenda aimed at improving adolescent sexual and reproductive health, reducing their vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and protecting them from gender-based violence (Kennedy et al., 2011).

The context of limited access to healthcare, education, and social protection significantly contributes to the occurrence of adolescent pregnancies (Save the Children Organization, 2022). Pregnancy and parenting bring serious social and economic costs to young mothers, directly affecting their educational

and professional paths and, later, their position in the labour market (Nanu et al., 2021). Poverty and material deprivation are both a determining factor and a consequence of fertility among underage females (Oke, 2010). With significant repercussions on education, professional life, and economic opportunities, adolescent pregnancy can have long-term socio-economic consequences. These include poor health conditions, the deepening of gender inequality and material hardship caused by poverty – impacts that extend to the mother, the child, the family and the communities to which they belong (Greene & Merrick, 2005; UNFPA, 2007; World Bank, 2007).

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive methodological design based on official data concerning adolescent motherhood in Romania, along with several indicators reflecting the obstetric medical dimension. The units of analysis were mothers under the age of 15 and those aged between 15 and 19, at the national level. Data aggregation was carried out by territorial development regions and counties. We analysed the evolution over time of the number of live births and age-specific fertility rates over the past 30 years. The primary data sources were the National Institute of Statistics, through the Tempo Online platform, and the European Health for All database provided by the World Health Organization. For the first part of the results, we used data on the number of live births to mothers under 15 and those aged 15–19, broken down by territorial development region, and followed their evolution from 1993 to 2023. In the second section of the results, we examined trends in the number of abortions in Romania compared to the European average, age-specific stillbirth rates, and the incidence of caesarean sections in Romania.

To illustrate regional disparities related to the social and economic context, we referred to data on relative poverty by sex and age group, as well as the territorial distribution of marginalised urban and rural areas (Teşliuc et al., 2016; Swinkels et al., 2013). We also consulted national legislation to better understand how the state regulates sexual education. Studies and reports published by the Filia Centre and the Association of Independent Midwives were central in helping us understand the social discrepancies in access to quality medical services and how obstetric violence is experienced by women in Romania.

4. Results

Adolescent Motherhood in Romania

Official data indicates that the fertility rate among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years ranges from 27.2 per 1.000 (INS, n.d.) to 34 per 1.000 (World Bank, n.d.). These figures are considerably higher compared to other developed countries. The adolescent fertility rate in the European Union has been reported to be 7 births per 1.000 women aged 15 to 19 years. (World Bank, n.d.). In 2023 the total number of live births to mothers aged 19 or younger was 15.062. Of these, 643 children were

born to very young mothers under the age of 15 (Eurostat, n.d.). This statistic places Romania at the top of European countries with the highest number of children born to very young mothers. According to Eurostat, in 2023, 42 percent of all children born to mothers aged between 10 and 14 across the EU were born in Romania. Moreover, some women in these age groups have experienced multiple births during their youth (see Figure 1). In 2023, of the 648 children born to mothers under the age of 15, 17 already had an older sibling. Ten years earlier, this number was 42. Among mothers aged 15–19, there are already cases of third or even fourth children being born.

Figure 1. Number of Children Born to Mothers Aged 19 or Younger, by Birth Order
Source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, authors' calculations

Figure 2 highlights a clear downward trend in the number of children born to mothers aged between 15 and 19 across all regions of the country. The South-Muntenia region records some of the highest values, both in 1993 (8.707 births) and in 2023 (2.488 births), followed closely by the North-East region, which has slightly lower figures. These regions are also those that concentrate the highest proportions of the population living in poverty. On the other hand, the Bucharest-Ilfov region, characterized by increased economic development, has consistently recorded the lowest number of births compared to other regions. Regional disparities were much more pronounced in the early 1990s – for instance, there were nearly 9.000 births in South-Muntenia and just over 2.000 in Bucharest-Ilfov.

Over time, these discrepancies between development regions have decreased, yet the gap between the region with the highest number of births and the one with the lowest remains visible. In 2023, the Centre region (leading in the number of adolescent births) registered 2.533 births (an increase compared to 2022), followed by the North-East and South-Muntenia regions with 2.500 and 2.488 births respectively. At the opposite end are the Bucharest-Ilfov and West regions, with fewer than 1.000 and slightly over 1.000 births, respectively.
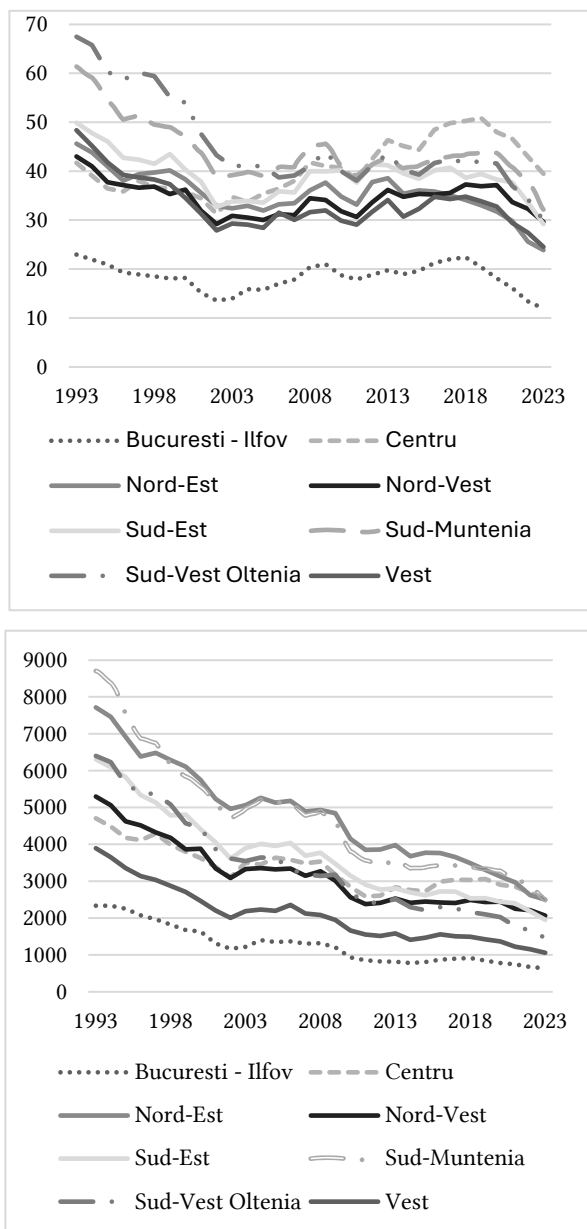
Figure 2. Age-Specific Fertility Rate and Number of Children Born to Mothers Aged 15 to 19
Source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, authors' calculations

Methodological Note: Fertility rates per 1,000 (left) and absolute number of children born (right). For the period 1993–2011, the population refers to the official population, while for the period 2012–2023, it refers to the resident population.

Discrepancies are not only evident when comparing regions, but they also persist within regions themselves. The county-level distribution of the age-specific fertility rate for women aged 15 to 19 shows that certain counties contribute disproportionately to the high levels of adolescent fertility (see Figure 3). Examples include Sălaj in the North-West region, Mureş and Braşov in the Centre region, and Ialomiţa, Călăraşi, and Giurgiu in the South-Muntenia region.
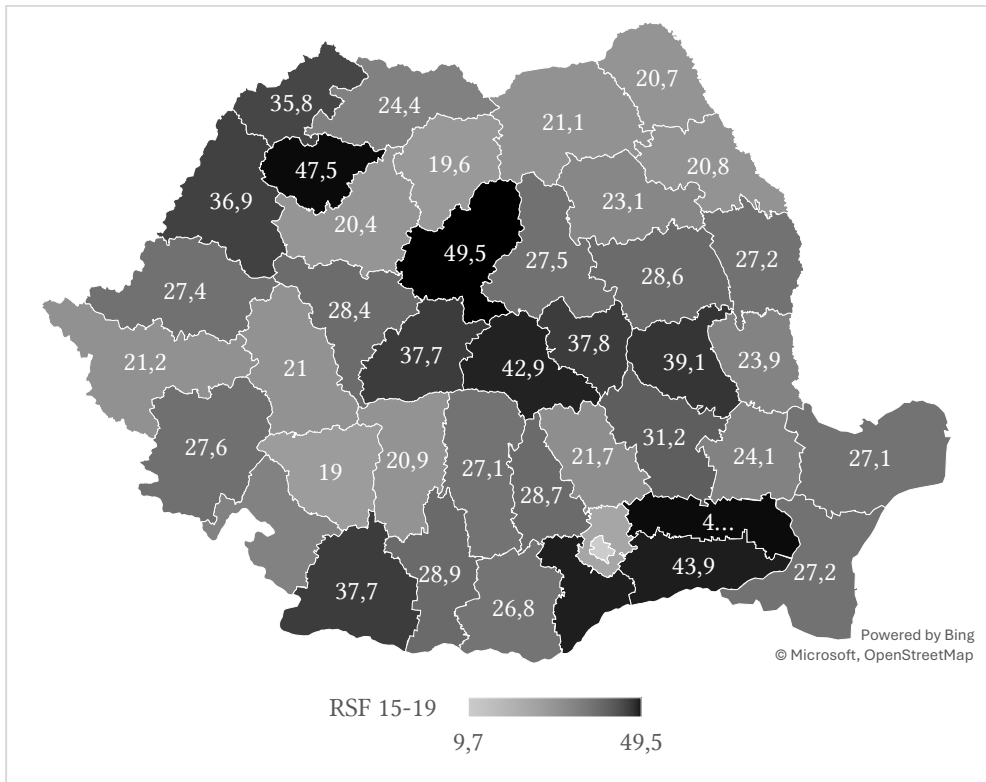
Figure 3. Spatial distribution of the Age-Specific Fertility Rate for Women
Aged 15–19 in 2023
Source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, authors' calculations

The general trend in the number of births to mothers under the age of 15 from 1993 to 2022 is one of increase, with most regions showing significant growth in the number of births among very young mothers (see Figure 4). The region covering the central part of the country recorded the highest number of births – 171 newborns in 2022 – doubling the figure from the first year analysed, which saw only 87 births in the region in 1993. These high values can be explained by the fact that Mureş County registers the highest number of births to mothers under 19 nationally. Similarly, the North-West region also doubled its number of births during the analysed period, from 45 to 101. The South-Muntenia region is also

among the top, with 119 births recorded in 1993. Its trajectory has shown notable fluctuations, reaching 127 pregnancies in the most recent year analysed. The region with the lowest values remains Bucharest-Ilfov, with 22 and 28 births, respectively, and its trend has remained relatively constant over time.

The highest numbers of children born to adolescent mothers are found in the regions of the country with the highest relative poverty rates and those that concentrate the largest numbers of marginalised rural and urban communities. This overlap reflects the link between adolescent fertility and material deprivation. Previous studies have shown that poverty is one of the key determinants of high fertility among young women (Oke, 2010). Most villages with marginalised communities are in the North-East, Centre, South-West Oltenia, and North-West regions (Teşliuc et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the regions with the highest shares of the population living in marginalised urban areas are the North-East and Centre, each with 4.3 percent of the total population, and the South-East, with 4.2 percent (Swinkels et al., 2013). The regions with the highest percentages of the population residing in areas disadvantaged in terms of human capital (education, health, family size, number of children per household) are the North-East with 14.8 percent of the population, the North-West with 13.3 percent, and South-Muntenia with 13.2 percent (Swinkels et al., 2013).
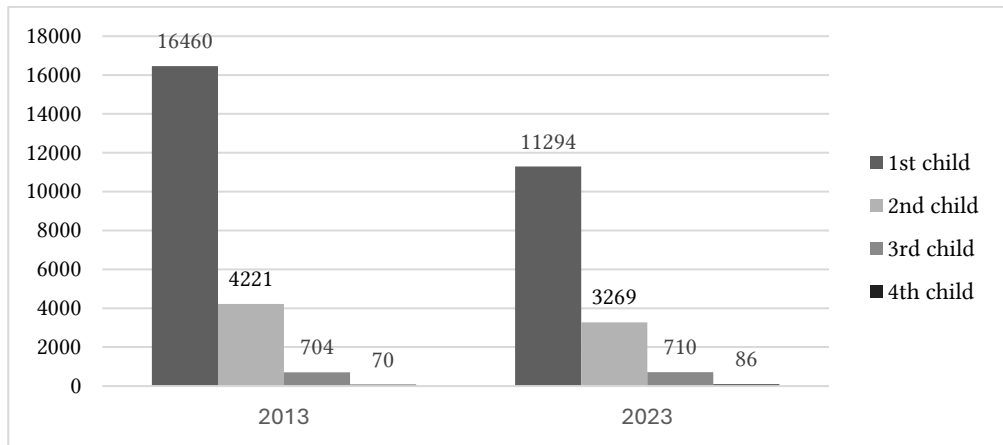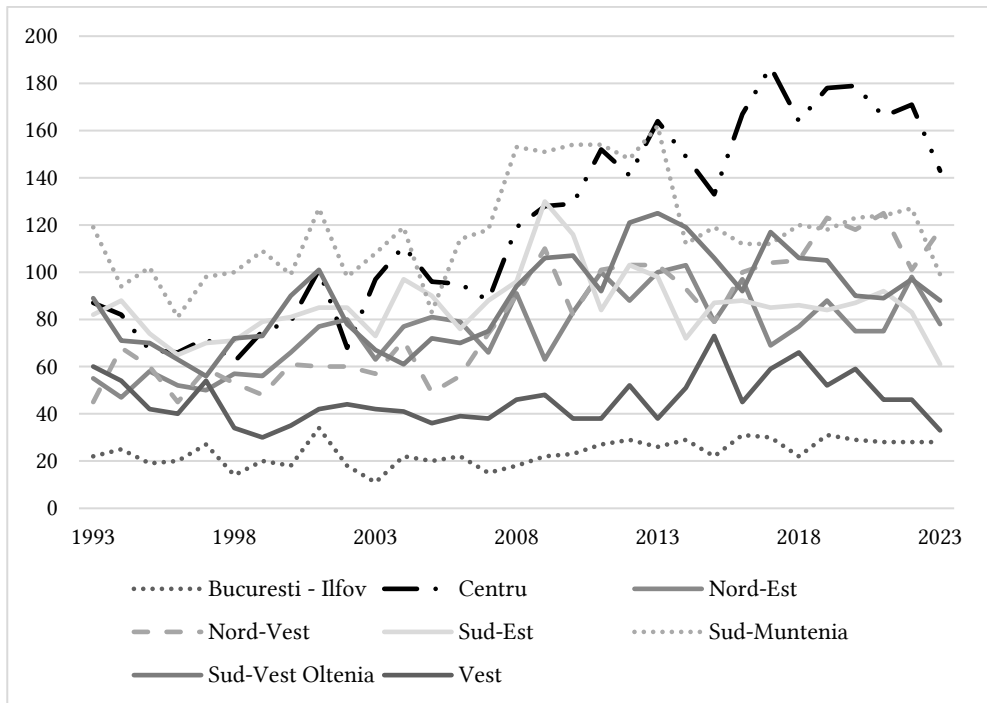

Figure 4. Number of Children Born to Mothers Under the Age of 15
Source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, authors' calculations

Reproductive Education and Medical Practices

Sexual education is one of the key measures for preventing adolescent pregnancies and is also essential in ensuring the internalisation of knowledge necessary for sexual and reproductive health (Pradhan et al., 2015). Romanian legislation states that sexual education is not mandatory in the school curriculum and can only be delivered with parental consent. Law no. 191 of 2020 (Parliament of Romania, 2020), amending and supplementing Law no. 272/2004 (Parliament of Romania, 2004) on the protection and promotion of children's rights, stipulates in Article 46: "(3) i) the systematic implementation in educational institutions, starting with the 8th grade, with the written consent of parents or legal guardians, of health education programmes aimed at preventing sexually transmitted infections and adolescent pregnancies."

Several weaknesses of this law can be identified. First, it frames sexual education as part of the broader "Health Education" subject, rather than establishing it as an independent discipline. Second, it stipulates that sexual education may only begin in the 8th grade, meaning that it is delivered only to pupils aged 14–15 and above. Yet, statistics show that pregnancies among girls under 15 are on the rise, while the number of births to those aged 15–19 is decreasing. This underscores the importance of providing age-appropriate sexual education to pupils younger than 15 (Neculau et al., 2022). Finally, the requirement for parental or legal guardian consent for participation in sexual education classes (Law 191/2020) may restrict young people's right to informed choice, which undermines the goal of preventing adolescent pregnancies (Neculau et al., 2022).

The high number of pregnancies among very young females can also be explained by limited access to abortion services nationwide. The cost of an abortion can be a barrier for underage mothers, as can the refusal of some doctors to perform the procedure. Although abortion is legal in Romania through Law 286/2009, paragraphs 6–7 (Parliament of Romania, 2009), access to the procedure appears increasingly limited (Association of Independent Midwives, 2024; Filia Centre, 2021). While the number of abortions in Romania has sharply declined (see Figure 5), in contrast to the slightly increasing trend across the EU, this apparent "success" may reflect restricted access to abortion in public hospitals rather than improved access to sexual education and family planning. It is therefore likely that this trend masks significant inequalities among different categories of young women.

Recent research raises important questions about the equity of this apparent progress, as women from disadvantaged backgrounds may face greater obstacles in accessing safe and affordable services. A study conducted by the Filia Centre (2021) revealed that, out of 171 hospitals with obstetrics and gynaecology departments included in the research, only 59 perform abortions on request. The most common explanations given by doctors for refusing such procedures are religious and moral reasons (Filia Centre, 2021).

In a 2024 report on access to safe abortion, the Association of Independent Midwives published a map of abortion accessibility. Of the 176 public medical units included in the study, 111 (63.6%) do not offer abortion as a medical service, and

only 7 public units (4%) provide medication or surgical abortions in accordance with national legislation. Among the private medical facilities included in the study, 59 provide either medical or surgical abortions. The counties with the lowest levels of access to abortion are Botoșani, Arad, Sălaj, Bacău, Vaslui, Covasna, Caraș-Severin, Brăila, Ialomița, Călărași, Giurgiu, Constanța, and Dâmbovița. Consequently, the regions with the most limited access to abortion services are South-Muntenia, North-East, and West. Mureş County registers the highest level of abortion accessibility: 20–30 percent (Association of Independent Midwives, 2024).
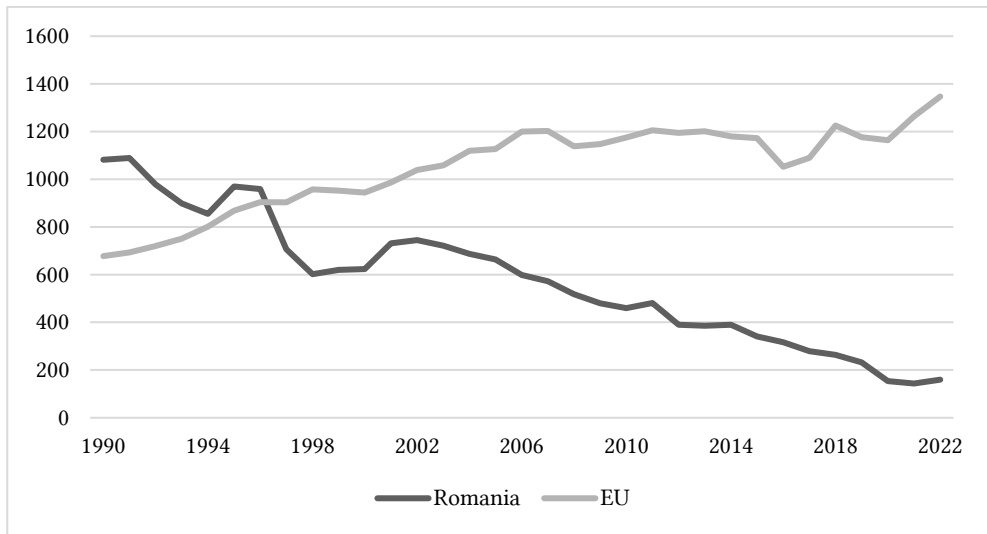
Figure 5. Evolution of the Number of Abortions per 1.000 Births in Romania
and the European Union
Source: World Health Organization, European Health
for All Database (HFA-DB), authors' calculations

The Code of Medical Ethics of the Romanian College of Physicians (04.11.2016) states in Article 34 – Refusal to Provide Medical Services, paragraph (1): "Refusal to provide medical care is permitted strictly under the law or if, through the request made, the person in question asks the physician to carry out acts that would undermine their professional independence, affect their image or moral values, or the request is not in line with the fundamental principles of the medical profession, its purpose, or its social role" (Romanian College of Physicians, 2016). This legal framework significantly restricts access to safe abortion, even though abortion is legal in Romania. Additionally, such procedures come with material costs that people in need may not be able to afford. The cost of an abortion varies between 70 RON and 1,200 RON, depending on the hospital (Filia Centre, 2021). A large part of Romania's population experiences material hardship, which may act as a barrier to accessing this medical service. Many pregnant minors come from families living in extreme poverty, with less than 3–4 USD per day per family

member (Save the Children Organization, 2024). Furthermore, the Coronavirus crisis has significantly contributed to the inaccessibility of abortion services: fewer and fewer medical facilities performed abortions on request during the pandemic (Filia Centre, 2021).

Romania's network of family planning clinics was created in 1992 following the model of the Society for Education in Contraception and Sexuality (SECS). In 1994, there were 242 public clinics; by 2020, only 117 remained operational. Additionally, health insurance covers only two consultations per year for family planning (Draghici, 2022). This withdrawal of the state from providing reproductive health services has multiple negative implications for women's sexual and reproductive health. The global family planning policy effort index shows that Romania scores the lowest among all countries analysed (Rosenberg et al., 2023). Moreover, contraceptive prevalence in Romania was only 53.5 percent in 2019 (United Nations, 2019). The most used contraceptive method is the condom (20.3%), followed by oral contraceptives (14%) and the calendar method (6%) (United Nations, 2019). An important point to note is that in Romania, the cost of contraceptives is not covered by the health system –neither for young people (up to the age of 19 or 25), nor for people in vulnerable situations. Countries such as France and Belgium rank at the top of the index, with scores above 90 percent. According to Save the Children Organization Organisation, the lack of contraceptive use and insufficient information account for two-thirds of pregnancies among underage girls (Save the Children Organization, 2024).

The stillbirth rate is an indicator that measures the frequency of births resulting in stillborn infants. This indicator reflects both access to and the effectiveness of medical care during pregnancy and childbirth. High values may indicate the absence of regular medical check-ups, undiagnosed complications, insufficient or delayed medical interventions, among other factors. At the same time, the stillbirth rate is also a social indicator that allows for comparisons across time and between different groups of women. According to Figure 6, in Romania, the incidence of stillbirths has been declining. For the population of young women aged 15 to 34, the stillbirth rate in 1990 ranged from 5.5 to 9 per 1,000. In 2023, it does not exceed 4 per 1,000 among this age group.

Based on age group, Figure 6 shows that, in recent years, the stillbirth rate has been highest among mothers under 15 and those aged 15 to 19. This is not an unexpected result for several reasons. Women who become pregnant at very young ages, as well as those who do so later in life (over the age of 35), are at higher risk for obstetric complications (National Institute of Public Health, 2022). For very young pregnant women, limited access to medical services and restricted reproductive education also play a role. The extreme values of the stillbirth rate in 2006 and 2015 for the under-15 category coincide with sharp increases in adolescent births during those years. Rapid short-term increases in the number of births, age-specific fertility rates, and stillbirth rates indicate a structural issue within the Romanian healthcare system, one that routinely neglects certain social groups, especially women from disadvantaged backgrounds.
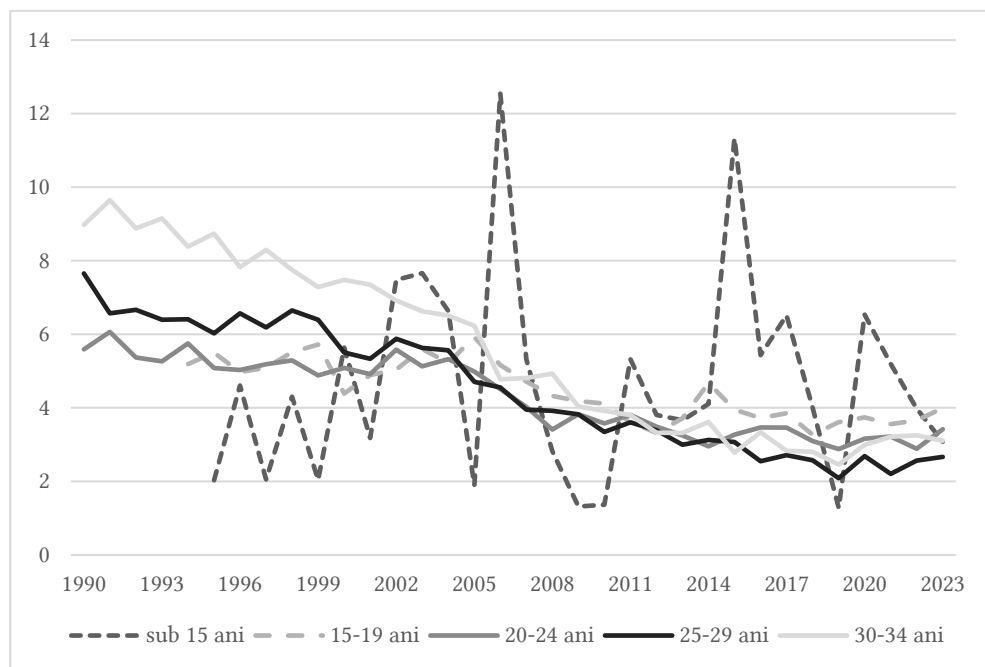
Figure 6. Stillbirth Rate by Mother's Age Group
Source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania, authors' calculations

While stillbirth rates raise critical questions about the quality of perinatal care and the healthcare system's ability to prevent avoidable deaths, another important indicator of how medicine shapes the childbirth experience is the frequency of surgical interventions. Caesarean section, a predominant surgical technique in obstetrics, can serve as an indicator of reproductive disparities. The frequency and circumstances under which this intervention occurs point to significant inequalities in access to quality medical care, women's autonomy in making informed decisions about their bodies, and the effectiveness of health policies and medical practices in addressing the needs of diverse social groups (Betran et al., 2021).

In Romania, caesarean birth is an increasingly common practice. More than 45 percent of all live births occur via caesarean section (see Figure 7). This rate places Romania among the top European countries in terms of caesarean incidence, significantly exceeding the 10–15 percent threshold recommended by the World Health Organization.
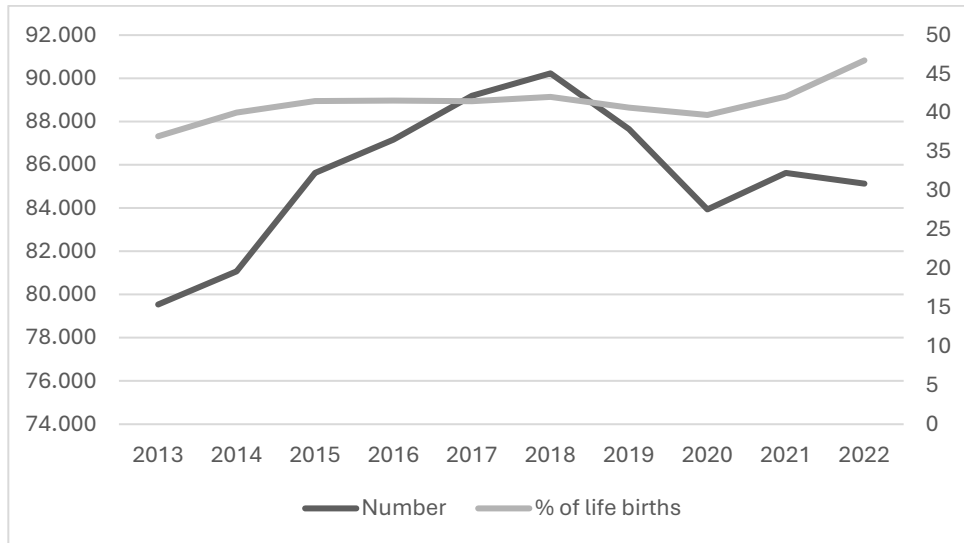
Figure 7. Caesarean sections in Romania
Source: National Institute of Statistics, Romania and Eurostat, authors' calculations

Other recent studies show that more than half of all births in Romania are performed by caesarean section (Slovenski et al., 2024). Most of these caesarean births are scheduled in advance and are not the result of medical emergencies (Neaga et al., 2024). The limited research available on this issue also highlights the inequalities between public and private healthcare services. For financial and profitability reasons, rather than due to informed personal choice or considerations of maternal and infant health, almost 80 percent of births in private maternity clinics are caesarean deliveries (Slovenski et al., 2024). A similar pattern is observed in public hospitals, which receive higher public funding if procedures are classified as more complex, such as caesarean sections. In over 70 percent of cases, the decision to undergo a caesarean section was made following the doctor's recommendation, and among the women who made the decision themselves, the most common reason cited was fear of pain (Neaga et al., 2024).

4. Conclusions

By overlapping the image of uneven economic development with that of adolescent fertility, we have shown that poverty intersects with gender in a profound way. Although our analyses are not complex enough to demonstrate the statistical intensity of the relationship between these two phenomena, the descriptive results we presented offer clear evidence of the link between structural factors, primarily poverty, and adolescent motherhood. We argue that adolescent girls living in the most marginalised areas of the country are disproportionately affected. They grow up in environments where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched, reproductive autonomy is restricted, and institutions are perceived as absent or hostile. In this context, adolescent motherhood can be understood not

only as a consequence of economic precariousness but also as part of a broader dynamic of structural gender violence. The lack of access to safe reproductive services, quality education, and institutional support constitutes a profound capability deficit. These conditions are perpetuated, reinforcing the social marginalisation of young mothers and their children. In Bourdieu's terms, the lack of educational and economic capital among these young women limits their ability to navigate the reproductive field as conscious and autonomous actors. The overlap between poverty, unequal access to prenatal care, and high rates of invasive medical interventions signals a healthcare system that, rather than correcting structural inequalities, reproduces and even intensifies them.

These structural dynamics cannot be understood separately from the legal and institutional framework that shapes access to sexual education, safe abortion, and obstetric care. We have also examined how the legal context contributes (directly or indirectly) to the perpetuation of adolescents' reproductive vulnerability. Although abortion is legal and sexual education is formally regulated, real access to these services remains severely limited. The Health Education Law, conditioned by parental consent and implemented only from the eighth grade, excludes precisely the most vulnerable category, girls under the age of 15, where the number of births is rising, alongside a persistently high stillbirth rate. Access to abortion is systematically constrained by costs, institutional refusals, and inadequate medical infrastructure. In Foucauldian terms, this situation may be interpreted as a form of biopower that disciplines young bodies through deliberate inaction, delegating moral responsibility to the familial and religious spheres.

One important limitation of this study is its inability to quantify, in probabilistic terms, the strength of structural factors' effects on women's reproductive health. In arguing that reproductive inequalities and gender violence have structural determinants, one might expect a statistical testing of relationships between the various proxies that describe the phenomenon under study. However, this study does not claim to offer a statistically advanced model that thoroughly captures the complexity of this social and demographic reality. Rather, our aim was to explore an empirical universe that is largely overlooked in current research and scarcely addressed by the state as a matter requiring intervention.

The primary contribution of this study is its capacity to consolidate many aspects of reproductive inequality and gender-based violence in Romania into a singular narrative. Although numerous publications we reviewed examine reproductive inequalities with scientific rigour, we identified no study that synthesises the diverse factors discussed here into an integrated framework. This work establishes an important basis for a scientific and institutional agenda that perceives adolescent motherhood not as an individual deviation, but as a significant indicator of systemic inequality that necessitates acknowledgement, examination, and intervention.

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PERIOD POVERTY, PIONEERS AND LAGGARDS. CASE STUDY: SCOTLAND AND NEW ZEALAND VS ROMANIA

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Abstract: This article explores the topic of period poverty, a global phenomenon affecting roughly 500 million (Marshall & Norman, 2022; Michel et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2024; Parkinson et al., 2024) out of the 1.8-1.9 billion menstruating women worldwide (Dave et al., 2022; Mendonça Carneiro, 2021; Miller et al., 2024), with a negative impact on health, education, self-esteem and equality between the two sexes. The study starts from a theoretical perspective that highlights the link between limited access to menstrual products, menstrual stigmatisation and socio-economic inequalities. The objective of the research is to analyse the structural barriers that hinder the fight against period poverty and to identify effective ways to improve the accessibility of menstrual hygiene products, with a focus on their subsidization. This article employs the comparative case study method, comparing the approaches in Scotland and New Zealand, pioneer countries in implementing top-down public policies, with Romania's situation, where bottom-up initiatives remain limited. The sources used throughout this article include the academic literature, government reports and data provided by non-governmental organisations. The main conclusions underline the success of top-down public policies in tackling period poverty, highlighting the need to subsidise menstrual products and menstrual hygiene education. The article argues that integrated approaches involving governments, organisations and communities are essential to ensure universal access to the resources needed to manage menstruation in a dignified and healthy manner.

Keywords: period poverty, case study, Scotland, New Zealand, Romania.

Résumé : Cet article explore le thème de la pauvreté menstruelle, un phénomène mondial qui touche environ 500 millions de femmes sur les 1.8 à 1.9 milliard de femmes en âge d'avoir leurs règles dans le monde (Dave et al., 2022; Mendonça Carneiro, 2021; Miller et al., 2024) et qui a un impact négatif sur la santé, l'éducation, l'estime de soi et l'égalité entre les deux sexes. L'étude part d'une perspective théorique qui met en évidence le lien entre l'accès limité aux produits menstruels, la stigmatisation menstruelle et les inégalités socio-

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économiques. L'objectif de la recherche est d'analyser les barrières structurelles qui entravent la lutte contre la pauvreté menstruelle et d'identifier des moyens efficaces pour améliorer l'accessibilité des produits d'hygiène menstruelle, en mettant l'accent sur leur subvention. La méthodologie utilisée est celle d'une étude de cas, comparant les approches de l'Ecosse et de la Nouvelle-Zélande, pays pionniers dans la mise en œuvre de politiques publiques descendantes, avec la situation de la Roumanie, où les initiatives ascendantes restent limitées. Les sources utilisées sont la littérature académique limitée, les rapports gouvernementaux et les données fournies par les organisations non gouvernementales. Les principales conclusions soulignent le succès des politiques publiques descendantes dans la lutte contre la pauvreté menstruelle, en insistant sur la nécessité de subventionner les produits menstruels et l'éducation à l'hygiène menstruelle. L'article soutient que des approches intégrées impliquant les gouvernements, les organisations et les communautés sont essentielles pour garantir un accès universel aux ressources nécessaires pour gérer les menstruations de manière digne et saine.

Mots-clés : pauvreté menstruelle, étude de cas, Écosse, Nouvelle-Zélande, Roumanie.

Rezumat: Acest articol explorează tema sărăciei menstruale, un fenomen global care afectează aproximativ 500 de milioane din cele între 1.8 și 1.9 miliarde de femei de vârstă fertilă (Dave et al., 2022; Mendonça Carneiro, 2021; Miller et al., 2024), având un impact negativ asupra sănătății, educației, stimei de sine și egalității dintre cele două sexe. Studiul pornește de la o perspectivă teoretică care evidențiază legătura dintre accesul limitat la produsele menstruale, stigmatizarea menstruației și inegalitățile socioeconomice. Obiectivul cercetării este de a analiza barierele structurale care împiedică combaterea sărăciei menstruale și de a identifica metode eficiente pentru îmbunătățirea accesibilității produselor de igienă menstruală, cu accent pe subvenționarea acestora. Metodologia utilizată este cea a studiului de caz, comparând abordările din Scoția și Noua Zeelandă, țări-pionier în implementarea politicilor publice de tip top-down, cu situația din România, unde inițiativele bottom-up rămân limitate. Sursele includ literatura academică, rapoarte guvernamentale și date oferite de organizații neguvernamentale. Principalele concluzii subliniază succesul politicilor publice de tip top-down în combaterea sărăciei menstruale, evidențiind necesitatea subvenționării produselor menstruale și a educației privind igiena menstruală. Articolul susține că abordări integrate, care implică guverne, organizații și comunități, sunt esențiale pentru asigurarea accesului universal la resursele necesare gestionării menstruației într-o manieră demnă și sănătoasă.

Cuvinte-cheie: sărăcie menstruală, studiu de caz, Scoția, Noua Zeelandă, România.

1. Introduction: Background on period poverty

Even though menstruation is a natural biological process that occurs monthly in the lives of an estimated 1.8-1.9 billion women worldwide (Dave et al., 2022; Mendonça Carneiro, 2021; Miller et al., 2024), period poverty and menstrual hygiene are pressing global issues that impact women's health, education, self-esteem and equality, affecting hundreds of millions of women around the world, including in developed countries. Lack of access to menstrual products affects not only women's health and well-being but also their educational opportunities, perpetuating gender inequality. The stigma associated with menstruation can be eliminated by raising awareness, promoting access to affordable and sustainable

menstrual products and supporting policy reforms. Through targeted campaigns and partnerships, health marketers can also improve menstrual hygiene education, ensuring that women and girls everywhere have all the knowledge and resources they need to manage their menstruation safely and with confidence (Miller et al., 2024; Parkinson et al., 2024).

2. Methodology and objectives

This article uses the case study method, implementing a multiple case design and using the comparative synthesis technique to analyse the evolution and differences in the fight against period poverty in Scotland and New Zealand – two pioneers in this area – and Romania, a European Union Member State that has largely lagged behind global efforts to combat period poverty. In Romania, academic articles and studies on this topic are almost entirely lacking, hence the main limitation of this article. This case study aims to reveal the structural barriers that prevent improving women's quality of life concerning their health. It also aims to identify effective methods for better accessibility of menstrual hygiene products, and the primary method identified is subsidising menstrual products.

3. Review of the academic literature on period poverty

Approximately 52 percent of women, representing 26 percent of the global population, are of reproductive age. Most of them have monthly menstrual cycles lasting between two and seven days. Menstruation is a regular and integral part of life, and menstrual hygiene is fundamental to women's dignity and well-being, as it is an important part of the basic hygiene, sanitation and reproductive health services to which every woman should be entitled. Thanks to the courage and innovation of individuals and organisations engaged in pioneering work on poverty and menstrual hygiene, the level of knowledge and interest in this global issue is steadily increasing (Parkinson et al., 2024). A critical problem faced by at least 500 million women worldwide every month (Marshall & Norman, 2022; Michel et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2024; Parkinson et al., 2024), period poverty is defined as lack of access to menstrual products, sanitation, education and information (Marshall & Norman, 2022; Parkinson et al., 2024). The most common problems faced by women affected by period poverty relate to the affordability and accessibility of menstrual products, shame and fear of shame, cultural alienation, and lack of supplies and sanitation (Michel et al., 2022; Parkinson et al., 2024).

When menstruation takes them by surprise, without having menstrual products on hand or even the possibility to buy them, many women are forced to improvise, using, depending on the level of development of the milieu and the country of origin, napkins, paper towels, toilet paper, socks, torn pieces of old blankets and mattresses, chicken feathers, old rags, dirty kitchen sponges, newspapers, mud or even cow dung (Michel et al., 2022; Parkinson et al., 2024; Tull, 2019). Smells and leakage become a challenge (Lansbury Hall, 2021; Michel et al., 2022; Parkinson et al., 2024; Tull, 2019), and for schoolgirls and students, these

negative experiences of menstruation can lead to discomfort, distraction, absenteeism, or even dropping out of school and university (Michel et al., 2022; Parkinson et al., 2024; Tull, 2019). Those who resort to dropping out have difficulty entering the labour market, and even if they eventually manage to get a job, it will often be a low-paid one that does not offer financial security and long-term stability, predisposing them to socio-economic poverty (Michel et al., 2022; Parkinson et al., 2024). The health consequences of period poverty are also severe. The use of unsafe alternatives, or not using any of them at all, can cause both infections, such as urinary or reproductive tract infections, and more serious health consequences, such as toxic shock syndrome or even cervical cancer (Dave et al., 2022). There is also a clear link between poor menstrual hygiene and serious reproductive health problems (Mendonça Carneiro, 2021; Parkinson et al., 2024; Tull, 2019). The negative psychological aspects that period poverty fosters, such as shame, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem should not be overlooked either, given that they further hinder the well-being and active social participation of affected women (Dave et al., 2022; Parkinson et al., 2024; Tull, 2019). Nevertheless, the use of alternative products in extreme need is considered acceptable by most women, given that most public bathrooms do not offer free menstrual hygiene products (Dave et al., 2022).

In developed countries, period poverty also affects educational outcomes. For example, some US college students report having to choose between buying food or menstrual products, which affects their ability to focus on their studies and fully enjoy the benefits generally associated with student life (Parkinson et al., 2024). Furthermore, 14 percent of US students reported experiencing period poverty in the last year, while 10 percent report experiencing it every month (Marshall & Norman, 2022; Michel et al., 2022). Cultural stigma and taboos around menstruation exacerbate period poverty since menstruation is still considered dirty or shameful in many of the world's cultures. This not only isolates women but also exposes them to both physical dangers and risks to their health (Lansbury Hall, 2021; Miller et al., 2024; Parkinson et al., 2024; Tull, 2019). Although stigmatisation may be less severe in developed countries, it continues to persist in various forms, hampering, for example, essential conversations in everyday life, conversations between patients and healthcare providers, as well as conversations between policy-makers (Marshall & Norman, 2022; Miller et al., 2024). Taboos around menstrual discussions prevent the openness and policy changes so necessary to tackle period poverty effectively. The lack of comprehensive menstrual education equates to a lack of preparation of young women for their menstrual cycles, which compounds the problem (Parkinson et al., 2024). Moreover, in the same developed countries, there is also a normalisation of dysmenorrhea, caused both by misunderstanding and inadequate sharing of menstrual experiences and by the fact that patients are not taken seriously when they report or raise questions about the pain they experience around or during their menstrual cycle (Marshall & Norman, 2022).

In recent years, the presence of a menstrual activism movement has become increasingly noticeable, with, for example, health professionals, researchers, influencers, non-governmental organisations and political decision-makers using class consciousness to promote and support practical initiatives to combat period poverty and help alleviate the challenges faced by marginalised women. The energy and persistence of grassroots campaigns have prompted local, regional, national and even international responses to period poverty (Parkinson et al., 2024). However, a considerable challenge that stands in the way of addressing this problem is the chronic lack of tools, methods, data and research on period poverty, which has so far been largely ignored by academia (Tull, 2019). There is a clear need to step up academic efforts in period poverty research, and improving data collection is also essential to end this problem. A better academic understanding of period poverty leads to better allocation and utilisation of resources, meaning that future research will be better tailored to the most vulnerable. Alongside academic efforts, menstrual education encourages women to take responsibility for their menstrual health and enables communities to move towards a better understanding and destigmatisation of this natural process (Casola et al., 2022; Parkinson et al., 2024).

Menstrual hygiene products such as tampons and sanitary pads are indispensable for women. The industry that produces them generates billions of dollars annually (Dave et al., 2022). Since the average menstrual cycle lasts up to a week a month for about 40 years, an average woman usually experiences about 480 menstrual cycles over a cumulative period of about seven years. During this time, she may buy up to about 17.000 menstrual hygiene products, costing between two and five thousand dollars, depending on her preference for the products themselves (Dave et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2024). Moreover, women face additional financial difficulties caused by taxes imposed by the countries in which they live on menstrual products, often considered "luxury products" (Marshall & Norman, 2022); and if this was not enough, menstrual hygiene products are also affected by so-called "pink taxes", which refer to the unjustified increase in the prices of "luxury products" which are primarily targeted at women, these being two of the factors that are representative of the inequality between the two sexes (Miller et al., 2024). This inequality is further exacerbated by the fact that the same countries do not over-tax products aimed at men, such as condoms or erectile dysfunction drugs (Dave et al., 2022).

4. Case study: Scotland and New Zealand vs Romania

The following two sections explore three distinct national case studies – Scotland, New Zealand, and Romania – as illustrative examples of how period poverty can be addressed through either top-down or bottom-up approaches. Scotland and New Zealand serve as exemplars of the former, having taken decisive governmental action to ensure the free provision of menstrual hygiene products, particularly in public institutions such as schools and community centres. These countries demonstrate how national-level policy, underpinned by strong political

leadership and legislative support, can normalise access to menstrual products as a basic human right.

Scotland, in particular, made international headlines in 2020 when it became the first country in the world to pass legislation providing free menstrual products to anyone in need (Dave et al., 2022). This groundbreaking law was the result of sustained political advocacy and was built upon a prior initiative launched in 2018 to provide free menstrual products in all schools (Lansbury Hall, 2021). Similarly, New Zealand implemented a national programme in 2021 aimed at addressing the barriers period poverty creates for students, committing to providing free menstrual products in all schools and recognising the adverse impact that inadequate access can have on students' attendance and academic performance (Casola et al., 2022; Malatest International, 2023).

In contrast to the top-down models seen in Scotland and New Zealand, Romania exemplifies a bottom-up approach where progress has largely been driven by non-governmental organisations and community-led initiatives rather than national policy. Despite clear evidence of widespread period poverty in Romania – affecting an estimated one million women (Pe Stop Association, n.d.b) – progress at the national level has been slow and fragmented. Traditional cultural norms, limited sex education, and the legacy of Romania's communist past continue to hinder open discussion and policy development on menstruation (Rada, 2014). While efforts have been made to advocate for legislative change, including the submission of PL-x No. 372/2021 to the Romanian Parliament, such proposals have encountered resistance from the government and bureaucratic stagnation. Nevertheless, incremental progress is evident at the local level, where several district councils and educational institutions have launched pilot projects to distribute menstrual products in schools, often led or supported by civil society and student activism.

By comparing these three cases, the following two sections aim to shed light on the diverse institutional, cultural, and political conditions that shape the pursuit of menstrual equity across different national contexts. Scotland and New Zealand illustrate how sustained political will and comprehensive policy design can normalise menstrual product provision as a public good. At the same time, Romania's experience highlights the crucial role of grassroots movements in challenging stigma and addressing institutional gaps. Collectively, these examples offer valuable insights into the mechanisms through which period poverty can be addressed and the multifaceted nature of policy change in this area.

4.1. Pioneers: Top-down approach in Scotland and New Zealand

In November 2020, Scotland became the first country in the world to start providing free menstrual hygiene products to anyone in need (Dave et al., 2022). Labour MP Monica Lennon led efforts to issue the law on free menstrual products. The enactment of this law comes after Scotland also became the first country in the world to start providing free menstrual products to pupils in all schools starting in 2018 (Lansbury Hall, 2021). This rights-based legislation is grounded in six

fundamental principles: meeting individual needs, ensuring reasonable access, respecting dignity, promoting inclusivity, offering reasonable choice, and supporting environmental sustainability. These principles aim to eliminate period poverty without stigma, ensure accessibility for all and offer environmentally responsible product options (Scottish Government, 2022). While the legislation is robust, practices for implementing it include distributing free products through community centres, cultural venues, and pharmacies (Dave et al., 2022; Lansbury Hall, 2021); however, further evidence on outreach, public engagement, and accessibility logistics is limited.

New Zealand's approach also reflects a top-down policy model with a strong emphasis on equity and sustainability. In 2021, the government launched the *Ikura: Manaakitia te whare tangata – Period Products in Schools* programme, providing free menstrual products in all schools to address absenteeism due to period poverty (Casola et al., 2022; Malatest International, 2023). The initiative includes the option of reusable products to reduce environmental harm. A pilot study showed that 89% of students were satisfied with the reusable options, with more than half actively concerned about sustainability. These practices demonstrate effective alignment between policy and implementation, with wide student uptake and satisfaction (Malatest International, 2023).

Scotland and New Zealand offer two complementary yet distinct approaches to tackling period poverty through national policy. Scotland's strategy is deeply rooted in comprehensive legislation, establishing a rights-based framework supported by six guiding principles that prioritise dignity, accessibility, inclusivity, individual choice, and environmental responsibility. While the Scottish model emphasises universality and legal guarantees, practical implementation details remain less documented. In contrast, New Zealand's programme is more practice-oriented, focusing on schools as key sites for intervention. It combines social equity with environmental consciousness by offering both disposable and reusable products, with strong student engagement and satisfaction. Unlike Scotland's broader societal approach, New Zealand targets a specific population – i.e. schoolchildren – yet shows tangible outcomes in terms of uptake and sustainability awareness. Both models showcase effective state-led action but differ in scope: Scotland leads in legal innovation and universal access, while New Zealand excels in targeted delivery and measurable impact within educational settings.

4.2. Laggard: Romania's bottom-up approach

Compared to Scotland and New Zealand, where the issue of subsidising menstrual products had a top-down approach, in Romania, the situation is at the opposite pole, and the issue is being addressed in a bottom-up manner. It all started in January 2018, when a non-governmental organisation called the *Pe Stop Association* was founded, *pe stop* (literally *on stop*) being a popular Romanian slang for menstruation (c.f. English *on the rag*). The first action of this association was to distribute sanitary pads to homeless women in Bucharest's North Railway Station,

initially distributing only nine packs. Today, however, the association works with around a thousand beneficiaries every month, both in the capital and in rural areas. In addition to distributing menstrual products, *Pe Stop* also organises courses on hygiene, the body and consent. It is involved in the fight against poor living conditions and for "the right of all women to adequate menstrual hygiene products and information". In its first six years of activity, the association has distributed over 27.500 packages of menstrual hygiene products all over Romania, had around 1.400 participants in its menstrual hygiene courses and supported 800 people with essential products during emergencies (Pe Stop Association, n.d.a). In the fall of 2022, the *Pe Stop Association* launched the *Dignity Network*, an extension of its Bucharest-based activity model nationwide. 900 women in 15 counties receive menstrual hygiene products every month, distributed by the 21 local teams of volunteers that make up the *Dignity Network* today (Pe Stop Association, n.d.b). As of 2023, Romanians can redirect 3.5 per cent of their income tax to the *Pe Stop Association* (Vasilescu, 2023).

In Romania, an estimated one million women face period poverty (Pe Stop Association, n.d.b). However, sex education (and, by extension, menstrual education) remains a taboo subject in its very traditionalist society, which is one of the legacies of the pre-1989 communist regime (Rada, 2014). In October 2020, the *Iele-Sânziene Association* launched a petition calling the authorities to legally address menstrual education and poverty, citing New Zealand as a model to follow. The petition was launched on 30 January 2021, and a month later, it had already gained support from ten other non-governmental organisations. On May 28 of the same year, on International Menstrual Hygiene Day, the association submitted the petition to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, followed by meetings with representatives of the two ministries in June (Iele-Sânziene Association, n.d). The petition's greatest legislative triumph should have been *PL-x No. 372/2021*, a "draft law on facilitating access to education for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and supporting some homeless people by granting a financial incentive for the purchase of hygiene products", submitted to the Romanian Parliament on 15 September 2021, by 35 Members of the Parliament. Although it received a favourable opinion from the five committees to which it was sent, the Romanian Government issued a negative opinion at the time. The bill had remained in the drawers of the deputies since 26 September 2022, when the last amendments were submitted. However, the bill was initially adopted by the senators, albeit due to the overdue deadline for adoption (Romanian Chamber of Deputies, n.d).

In December 2021, the Local Council of Bucharest's 6th District approved the first pilot project to make menstrual products available free of charge in its schools (Iele-Sânziene Association, n.d). Two months later, the Local Council of the 5th District also approved an identical pilot project (Iele-Sânziene Association, n.d). In April, local councillors in Popeşti-Leordeni, Ilfov County, rejected a similar project. After another two months, the Local Council of the 3rd District approved a similar pilot project, and two months later, the initiative was taken up by the Local

Council of the 4th District, where it was rejected (Iele-Sânziene Association, n.d). In November 2022, students from the "Grigore Ghica" National High School in Dorohoi, Botoşani County, started their pilot project, the first initiative launched by and at the level of a single high school (Iele-Sânziene Association, n.d). At the end of 2022, the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences of the "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca became the first faculty in the country to install menstrual hygiene dispensers in all student toilets (Lucuţ, 2022). The Deva Local Council, Hunedoara County, has also decided that starting May 2024, all schoolgirls in the municipality will have free access to menstrual hygiene products in the school medical cabinets (Deva City Hall and Local Council, 2024).

Romania illustrates a bottom-up, civil society-driven response to period poverty, marked by the activism of non-governmental organisations in the absence of substantial state intervention. While local pilot projects and legislative proposals indicate growing awareness and grassroots momentum, structural barriers – e.g. cultural taboos and limited governmental support – continue to impede nationwide reform. The Romanian case highlights the critical role of civic engagement in advancing menstrual equity in contexts where political will remains limited.

5. Conclusions

When women do not have access to adequate menstrual hygiene products, this negatively affects their self-esteem, reducing their participation in education and employment. This article has explored the issue of period poverty and its influence on women, particularly in the case study countries of Scotland, New Zealand and Romania, highlighting both the structural inequalities and barriers to tackling period poverty and the fact that top-down public policies are more successful than bottom-up approaches in tackling period poverty. As we strive to create a world where every woman has access to the resources, education and support she needs to be healthy, we must address and overcome the barriers that currently limit us. As demonstrated throughout this article, implementing strategies to combat period poverty requires support from all community levels, from individuals and organisations to parliamentarians and governments, with subsidising menstrual products being the most effective and viable option. By ensuring free access to safe menstrual hygiene products, governments reduce gender inequality and improve women's health. Serious government focus on the provision of menstrual products proactively empowers millions of women to take more control of their health (Dave et al., 2022; Marshall & Norman, 2022; Parkinson et al., 2024).

Fighting period poverty and improving menstrual hygiene through appropriate actions, such as providing free menstrual products, hygiene promotion, improved education and the implementation of supportive policies, are essential to promoting women's health and gender equality. Prioritising menstrual health management within public health policies, educational settings and economic strategies can create a more inclusive society where menstruation is no longer a barrier to opportunity or well-being. These steps give women an extra

chance to live with dignity and reach their full potential. As these efforts intensify, health marketing can serve as a powerful tool to inform and inspire action that leads to sustainable improvements in the lives of women everywhere (Parkinson et al., 2024).

In conclusion, although menstruation is a natural biological process, women continue to encounter significant challenges stemming from its socio-economic impact on their livelihoods. Existing research on the intersections of poverty, menstrual hygiene, and educational disparities remains limited and insufficiently developed. While public policies can help to reduce the financial burden of menstrual products, policy-makers should pay more attention to reducing the stigmatisation of menstruation by normalising it as the basic biological fact that it is. Healthcare providers should also be better equipped to assess and address menstrual issues competently. This can be achieved by improving training in all health-related professional disciplines and integrating menstrual health and needs assessment into patient appointments and consultations. Menstrual health is a fundamental right of every woman. When women can manage their menstrual cycles in a dignified and accessible manner, their overall well-being and health, whether physical or mental, are enhanced (Miller et al., 2024).

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ASSESSING THE PSYCHOMETRIC PROPERTIES OF THE TECHNOSTRESS SCALE AMONG FEMALE SOCIAL WORKERS

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Abstract: In an era of accelerated digitalization, equal opportunities are strongly influenced by access to and adaptability to new technologies. This study analyses the phenomenon of technostress among female social workers, examining and confirming the psychometric value of a specific assessment tool. The research employed a psychometric instrument based on the Technostress Creators Scale (Tarafdar et al., 2007) to evaluate five dimensions of technostress: techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity, and techno-uncertainty. The analysis was conducted on a sample of 200 participants, mostly female social workers in training in undergraduate social work programs, but already active in the social work field. Exploratory factor analysis confirmed a valid structure of the instrument, identifying five factors. The results highlight the gender perspective in managing technological stress and the need for organizational policies that support continuous training and digital adaptability. The conclusions emphasize the importance of developing technological and digital competencies to reduce inequalities and promote equitable inclusion in the field of social work.

Keywords: technostress; equal opportunities; social work; digital competencies; emotional exhaustion; organizational policies.

Résumé : À une époque de numérisation accélérée, l'égalité des chances est fortement influencée par l'accès et l'adaptabilité aux nouvelles technologies. Cette étude analyse le phénomène du technostress chez les femmes assistantes sociales, en examinant et en confirmant la valeur psychométrique d'un outil d'évaluation spécifique. La recherche a utilisé un instrument psychométrique basé sur l'échelle d'évaluation du stress technologique (Tarafdar et al., 2007) pour évaluer cinq dimensions du technostress: surcharge technologique, intrusion technologique, complexité technologique, insécurité technologique et incertitude technologique. L'analyse a été réalisée sur un échantillon de 200 participantes, majoritairement des femmes assistantes sociales en formation dans des programmes de licence en travail social, mais déjà actives dans le domaine. L'analyse

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factorielle exploratoire a confirmé une structure valide de l'instrument, en identifiant cinq facteurs. Les résultats soulignent la perspective de genre dans la gestion du stress technologique et la nécessité de politiques organisationnelles favorisant la formation continue et l'adaptabilité numérique. Les conclusions mettent en évidence l'importance du développement des compétences technologiques pour réduire les inégalités et promouvoir une inclusion équitable dans le domaine du travail social.

Mots-clés : technostress; égalité des chances; travail social; compétences numériques; épuisement émotionnel; politiques organisationnelles.

Rezumat: Într-o eră a digitalizării accelerate, egalitatea de șanse este puternic influențată de accesul și adaptabilitatea la noile tehnologii. Studiul de față analizează fenomenul tehnostresului în rândul femeilor asistenți sociali, analizând și confirmând valoarea psihometrică a unui instrument de evaluare specific. Cercetarea a utilizat un instrument psihometric bazat pe scala evaluării stresului produs de tehnologie (Tarafdar et al., 2007) pentru a evalua cinci dimensiuni ale tehnostresului: supraîncărcarea tehnologică, intruziune tehnologică, complexitatea tehnologică, nesiguranță tehnologică și incertitudine tehnologică. Analiza a fost realizată pe un eșantion de 200 de participante, majoritatea femei asistenți sociali în formare la programe de licență în asistență socială, dar active în domeniul asistenței sociale. Analiza factorială exploratorie a confirmat o structură validă a instrumentului, identificând cinci factori. Rezultatele evidențiază perspectiva de gen în gestionarea stresului tehnologic și necesitatea unor politici organizaționale care să sprijine formarea continuă și adaptabilitatea digitală. Concluziile evidențiază importanța dezvoltării competențelor tehnologice pentru reducerea inegalităților și promovarea unei incluziuni echitabile în domeniul asistenței sociale.

Cuvinte-cheie: tehnostres; egalitate de șanse; asistență socială; competențe digitale; epuizare emoțională; politici organizaționale.

1. Introduction

Technostress, a phenomenon resulting from continuous connectivity and the widespread use of technology across various contexts, especially in the workplace, has become a growing focus in academic research. Its effects are often influenced by demographic factors like gender, with studies suggesting that women may experience this form of stress differently than men. Gaining insight into this gender-specific experience is crucial for designing effective interventions and support systems. Technostress has emerged as a critical challenge in professional settings, particularly within social work, where digital tools and electronic communication have become integral to daily practice. Research indicates that technostress arises from factors such as workflow disruptions, increased workload, and communication challenges, which collectively contribute to reduced efficiency, heightened frustration, and risks of burnout. Malfunctioning technology, duplicative tasks, and rigid digital systems have been identified as key barriers to productivity, often leading to excessive administrative burdens. Furthermore, social workers experience stress due to the expectation of constant availability and ethical uncertainties in electronic communication, exacerbating

professional boundaries and work-life balance issues (Hilty et al., 2023; Scaramuzzino & Barfoed, 2021).

Studies also highlight the correlation between technostress and overall job stress, with increased workloads and emotional exhaustion being prevalent among social workers. The inability to disconnect from work, coupled with high volumes of digital communication, further contributes to burnout and reduced job satisfaction. Additionally, exposure to workplace harassment through digital platforms underscores the broader psychosocial risks associated with technology use in social work (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Hilty et al., 2023). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including improved technology integration, clear communication policies, and workload management strategies at both organizational and individual levels. Strengthening digital literacy, establishing ethical guidelines, and fostering self-care practices can help mitigate the negative impacts of technostress, ensuring a more sustainable and supportive work environment.

Acknowledging the technostress phenomenon requires in depth and contextualised research. This article examines and confirms the psychometric value of a specific assessment tool based on the Technostress Creators Scale (Tarafdar et al., 2007). It evaluates five dimensions of technostress: techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity, and techno-uncertainty. Our study among the female social workers in Romania confirms and underlines its psychometric value.

2. Conceptual Approach of Technostress

Technostress is defined as the stress individuals experience due to their inability to adapt to or cope with information and communication technologies (ICTs) in a healthy manner (Tarafdar et al., 2007). Rooted in sociotechnical and role theory, technostress arises when individuals feel overwhelmed by the constant connectivity, complexity, and volume of information that ICTs demand, leading to psychological strain and a negative impact on productivity. These stressors – termed „technostress creators"– include techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity, and techno-uncertainty, each reflecting different dimensions of the burden that technology imposes on users (Tarafdar et al., 2011). The phenomenon is not merely a response to isolated events but is conceptualized as an ongoing process of imbalance between environmental demands and personal coping resources, following the transactional theory of stress (Tarafdar et al., 2014). Technostress has been shown to result in adverse outcomes such as job dissatisfaction, reduced organizational commitment, role conflict, role overload, decreased productivity, and innovation. However, subsequent research has acknowledged a more nuanced view, suggesting that the same technological conditions might also lead to „techno-eustress" – positive stress – when users perceive them as manageable and motivating (Tarafdar et al., 2019). This dual nature of technostress underscores the need for design interventions and

organizational support mechanisms that can either mitigate the distressing aspects or enhance the eustress potential of technology use.

Other researchers define technostress as a state of psychological strain and discomfort experienced by individuals as a direct or indirect outcome of dealing with rapidly evolving information and communication technologies (ICT) in organizational or personal contexts (Feng & Liu, 2024). This phenomenon emerges when users are continually exposed to technology-related demands that exceed their coping resources, manifested by adverse impacts on attitudes, thoughts, behaviours, and even physical well-being (Feng & Liu, 2024; Zielonka, 2022). In particular, dimensions such as techno-complexity, techno-uncertainty, techno-overload, and techno-insecurity are considered core aspects of technostress. These dimensions reflect the challenges individuals encounter when engaging with complex and frequently updated technologies, which, in turn, can lead to feelings of inadequacy, job insecurity, and the need for constant relearning (Signore et al., 2023; Zito et al., 2021).

Moreover, technostress is understood as an adaptive response to various stressors inherent in ICT usage. It encompasses cognitive and physiological symptoms, including anxiety, diminished concentration, fatigue, and physical disorders (Zito et al., 2021; Kupang et al., 2024). The prevailing body of literature emphasizes that the rapid digitalization of work environments and the constant connectivity demanded by modern technology play crucial roles in fostering such stress responses (Feng & Liu, 2024; Zielonka, 2022). The interplay between individual characteristics, such as digital literacy and coping strategies, and organizational factors, such as job demands and the support structures available, further modulates the extent of technostress experienced (Bešlagić & Đonlagić-Alibegović, 2024; Kupang et al., 2024). In effect, technostress not only undermines individual well-being but has also been linked to broader implications such as decreased productivity, lower job satisfaction, and adverse health outcomes.

In synthesis, technostress is a multifaceted construct capturing the stress response evoked by the pervasive use of digital technologies more likely. Its emergence is closely tied to the internal conflict between increasingly complex technological demands and an individual's ability to adapt or cope effectively with these demands, thereby affecting both psychological and physiological health.

2.1. Gendered perspective of technostress

Women experiencing telework report notable challenges with technostress. Telework, also referred to as remote work or telecommuting, is a flexible work arrangement that leverages information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enable employees to carry out their job responsibilities outside of conventional office environments. This decentralized approach to work may encompass home-based settings or other remote locations, such as designated telework centers. By reducing the need for daily commuting, telework has the potential to enhance employee productivity, promote work-life balance, and improve overall organizational efficiency (Allen et al., 2015; Macêdo et al., 2020).

Social workers often engage in telework to maintain client contact, provide counseling services, conduct case management, and coordinate care using digital platforms and communication tools. Especially during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, telework became essential for sustaining service delivery while ensuring safety for both clients and professionals. In a systematic examination of three studies (Gualano et al., 2022) comprising a review aggregating 19 studies (≈10,012 participants), a cross-sectional study (313 participants; 54.6% women), and a survey (927 participants; 43.04% women), researchers measured stressors including techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, techno-uncertainty, and role overload. Gualano et al. (2022) reported that TElewoRk-RelAted Stress (TERRA) levels were higher in female workers among 85.7% of the studies considering gender as a variable.

Techno-complexity is highly prevalent and impactful (La Torre et al., 2020). La Torre et al. (2020) found that techno-overload was significantly associated with female gender and unemployment, suggesting that employment status may interact with gender in shaping technostress experiences. They also highlight the association of techno-invasion with the female gender, indicating that women may experience more stress related to the intrusion of work into personal time and space through technology. Finally, they also found that role overload was significantly associated with female gender, indicating that women may experience higher levels of stress related to managing multiple roles and responsibilities. Similarly, Marchiori et al. (2019) suggest that techno-complexity is associated with the female gender and that women reported higher levels of techno-uncertainty.

Research indicates that the sources and impacts of technostress can differ notably between genders. For example, Hu et al. (2022) illustrate that dominant causes of techno-stressors vary across genders, suggesting that while men and women may both experience technostress, the contextual and psychological factors influencing their experiences can be distinct. Furthermore, Rohwer et al. (2022) discuss how women's lower reported levels of technostress in some studies may be due to their differing work conditions, emphasizing that traditional gender roles in the workplace significantly shape experiences of stress related to technology. Similarly, Bondanini et al. (2020) reinforce the notion that women often experience increased anxiety towards technological engagement, a psychological factor that can exacerbate the effects of technostress, particularly in demanding work environments.

The impact of technostress on women's productivity and mental health has also been noted in various contexts. Rosado et al. (2023) describe how technostress can lead to burnout, anxiety, and decreased job satisfaction, highlighting a direct negative correlation between technostress and overall well-being among workers, which can disproportionately affect women due to their often-multifaceted roles at work and home. This finding resonates with Estrada-Muñoz et al. (2021), who emphasize the repercussions of teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic, where many women in educational settings reported heightened stress from the blend of professional responsibilities and home life. Additionally, studies by García

et al. (2023) confirm a significant correlation between perceived organizational support and technostress, indicating that women often report higher levels of technostress, especially in environments lacking structural support. In healthcare contexts, technostress manifests significantly among female professionals, where Golz et al. (2021) found that although younger healthcare workers perceive themselves as having higher digital competence, women often appear to be more affected by technostress. This suggests a disparity not only in technological comfort but also in the psychological toll that such innovation can impose on women's mental health, thereby affecting their job performance and satisfaction levels. Research by Atanasoff and Venable (2017) highlights the necessity of identifying those most at risk for technostress, supporting the idea that different industries and demographics require tailored interventions.

Synthesizing, the literature reveals a complex interplay between gender and the experience of technostress, where women may face unique challenges influenced by societal roles, workplace dynamics, and support structures. Addressing these disparities is essential for improving work environments and ensuring mental health and productivity in the digital age. Future research should place greater emphasis on these gender differences, exploring the broader implications for organizational practices and personal well-being.

2.2. Technostress Measures

A variety of psychometric instruments have been developed to assess technostress, reflecting the growing theoretical sophistication and practical concern surrounding the impact of digital technologies on well-being. One of the most widely cited and empirically validated tools is the *Technostress Creators Scale* developed by Tarafdar et al. (2007). This scale conceptualizes technostress as arising from five core stress-inducing dimensions: techno-overload (pressure to work faster and longer), techno-invasion (invasion of work into personal life), techno-complexity (feelings of inadequacy due to complex technologies), techno-insecurity (fear of job loss due to new technologies), and techno-uncertainty (stress from constant technological change). Each of these dimensions is operationalized through multiple items rated on a Likert-type scale, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of how individuals experience stress in digitally mediated work environments. The scale has demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's alpha > .80 across dimensions) and has been applied across diverse occupational settings (Tarafdar et al., 2011, 2014, 2019).

Beyond this foundational measure, the literature reveals a growing number of validated instruments tailored to specific populations and cultural contexts. Despite the solid theoretical grounding of Tarafdar's model, the field exhibits measurement pluralism—i.e., the coexistence of multiple tools with varying factor structures, validation methods, and contextual focus (Borle et al., 2021; Fischer & Riedl, 2017). For example, Kot (2022) conducted a Polish adaptation of the Technostress Creators and Inhibitors Scale, confirming strong psychometric properties and applicability in workplace settings. Similarly, Vega-Muñoz et al.

(2022) validated a technostress instrument for Chilean university students using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), highlighting the need for academic-specific stress assessments.

Other validations further emphasize context-specific adaptation. Schettino et al. (2022) validated a technostress measure for Italian students in technology-enhanced learning contexts, while Veiga et al. (2022) translated and validated a Brazilian version of the techno-stress questionnaire, achieving robust reliability and construct validity. Additionally, López et al. (2021) used structural equation modelling (SEM-PLS) to assess technostress in professionals, confirming the reflective measurement model's appropriateness with high composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE). In educational contexts, studies by Wang et al. (2020) and Verde-Avalos et al. (2025) have created and validated technostress measures targeting university students, employing rigorous statistical methods including CFA to confirm internal structure and construct validity. Similarly, Ortega-Jiménez et al. (2023) provided evidence of validity for the Spanish version of the RED/TIC Technostress Scale among Ecuadorian teachers, while Shimabukuro-Lara et al. (2023) adapted the same tool for Peruvian workers.

All these instruments—complemented by the original work of Tarafdar et al.—illustrate the multidimensional and cross-cultural relevance of technostress. However, they also underscore the need for ongoing refinement, standardization, and comparative validation. Effective tools must consistently capture key dimensions such as techno-overload and techno-complexity while accounting for contextual nuances in culture, profession, and digital environment (Tarafdar et al., 2019; Fischer & Riedl, 2017; Kot, 2022). Future research should continue to enhance the diagnostic precision of technostress measures through integrative and interdisciplinary methodologies.

3. Method

The purpose of this research was to analyse the factorial structure of an instrument designed to measure technostress among female social workers, either in training or currently active. All participants were selected based on their involvement in the field of social work, either professionally or through various forms of volunteering. The study included 200 respondents, selected through a convenience sampling method. All participants identified as female and were enrolled in a bachelor's or master's degree program in social work. The data were collected online through Google Forms, and consent was obtained through the form. Data were collected in Romania from a Northeastern academic university. The instruments, consent, and data collection were designed respecting research law from Romania and following recommendation from the Helsinki Declaration. The Declaration of Helsinki (DoH) is the World Medical Association's (WMA) best-known policy statement. The first version was adopted in 1964 and has been amended seven times since, most recently at the General Assembly in October 2024. Of these, 96.5% were full-time students, while the remaining were enrolled in distance learning programs. Regarding age, 91.5% were between 18 and 24 years

old, 7.5% were between 30 and 44 years old, and the rest were over 45. Professionally, 6% were active social workers, 53.5% were social workers in training (students), 22.5% reported having other types of professions, and 18% preferred not to answer. In terms of work experience, 27% reported having between 0 and 2 years of experience, 9.5% had between 3 and more than 10 years, and 63.5% stated they had no work, but voluntary experience. Financially, 35.5% reported an income below the minimum wage, at the minimum wage level, or paid by the hour, 9% reported an income above the minimum wage, and 55.5% indicated that it was not applicable or preferred not to answer.

3.1. Instrument

The assessment of technological stress in this study was conducted using the Technostress Scale developed by Tarafdar et al. (2007) and published in the *Journal of Management Information Systems*. This validated psychometric instrument evaluates five distinct dimensions of technostress: techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity, and techno-uncertainty. Techno-overload reflects the pressure experienced by individuals – particularly educators – to perform more work, rapidly adapt existing habits, and manage increasingly constrained schedules due to technology use. Techno-invasion captures the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal life, such as reduced time with family and the intrusion of work-related notifications into leisure time. Techno-complexity relates to the perceived difficulty of learning and using new technologies, which often demand significant time and cognitive resources, as well as highly specialized knowledge. Techno-insecurity encompasses fears of job loss or marginalization resulting from insufficient technological skills, as well as feelings of competition or inequality among colleagues. Finally, techno-uncertainty refers to the stress induced by the constant emergence of new technologies and the need to continually adapt to frequent upgrades and changes. The data collection tool consisted of a 22-item questionnaire, with each item rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1 – Strongly Disagree" to "5 – Strongly Agree." The items were specifically designed to assess perceptions of technostress, including psychological discomfort and the individual adaptability of female social workers – in training, volunteer or work - to technological demands.

4. Results

The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to identify and validate the latent dimensions of the technostress construct among the participants. To assess the suitability of the data for EFA, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity were calculated (see Table 1.). The KMO index was 0.928, indicating excellent sampling adequacy for factor analysis (Kaiser, 1974). Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(231) = 2628.654$, $p < .001$, suggesting that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix, thereby justifying the application of EFA (Bartlett, 1954).

Table 1. Tests of Factorability for Principal Component Analysis

Test	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	0.928
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	$\chi^2(231) = 2628.654$, p < .001

Note. The principal component analysis (PCA) used Varimax rotation. Five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, explaining 69.69% of the total variance.

The principal component analysis (PCA) method was used for factor extraction, with Varimax rotation applied to enhance interpretability. The analysis (see Table 2) identified five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, which together explained 69.69% of the total variance in the data. The rotated component matrix showed that the items coherently clustered onto five distinct factors.

Table 2. Variance Explained by Each Extracted Factor

Factor	Eigenvalue	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	9.462	43.01%	43.01%
2	2.193	9.97%	52.98%
3	1.682	7.64%	60.62%
4	1.055	4.79%	65.42%
5	0.940	4.27%	69.69%

Note. Only factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained. Together, the five factors accounted for 69.69% of the total variance.

The overall extraction of factors followed the original structure of the instrument and results indicate that this is a stable structure. The five extracted factors together explain 69.69% of the total variance, which is considered very good in social science research, where values above 60% are generally acceptable. The multicomponent structure identified five factors as predominant. Factor 1 has an eigenvalue of 9.462, which means it explains a large portion of the variance, 43.01% of the total. This indicates that the first factor is the most dominant and captures the most significant pattern in the dataset. Factor 2 explains an additional 9.97% of the variance, with a cumulative variance of 52.98% when combined with Factor 1. This means that over half of the total variability in the responses is accounted for by the first two factors. Factor 3 adds another 7.64% of explained variance, bringing the cumulative total to 60.62%. This shows that three factors together explain a substantial majority of the variance. Factor 4 contributes 4.79%, raising the cumulative variance to 65.42%. Factor 5 explains a further 4.27%, and the total cumulative variance explained by all five factors is 69.69%.

Table 3. Rotated Component Matrix Using Varimax Rotation

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
D11	0.784		0.150	0.231	
D12	0.771	0.198	0.230		0.149
D14	0.766	0.145	0.205	0.117	0.176
D13	0.642	0.302	0.214		0.102

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
D10	0.627		0.270	0.159	
D20	0.138	0.850		0.132	0.124
D21	0.133	0.829	0.142	0.259	0.169
D19	0.146	0.789	0.176	0.117	
D22	0.184	0.765		0.302	0.165

Note. Loadings below .10 are omitted.

The results of the rotated factor loadings highlight that tehno-complexity (D10-D14) and tehno-uncertainty (D19-22) are clustering together clearly, while the other are less nuanced in the latent structure of the construct (see Table 3). Factor 1 (identified as tehno-complexity) exhibited strong loadings from items D10 (0.627), D11 (0.784), D12 (0.771), D13 (0.642), and D14 (0.766), suggesting that these items form a coherent and interpretable factor. Similarly, Factor 2 (identified as tehno-uncertainty) was defined by high loadings from items D19 (0.789), D20 (0.850), D21 (0.829), and D22 (0.765), indicating a second distinct latent construct. Items associated with the other factors (like overload, invasion and insecurity) showed relatively lower or more diffuse loadings, suggesting that these factors may represent more subtle or secondary dimensions of the data. Some items, such as D12 and D14, showed moderate secondary loadings on additional factors, but their primary associations remained with Factor 1. The omission of values below .10 and the communality values ranging from 0.50 to 0.82 (Table 4.) indicate that the factor solution adequately captured the shared variance among all items. Overall, the results support the presence of a clear two-factor structure, with the remaining factors accounting for additional but less distinct variance.

Table 4. Item communalities for Technostress scale

Technostress Scale items	Extraction
Techno-overload	
D1 Digitalization in the organization where I work/volunteer forces me to work much faster	,682
D2 Digitalization in the organization where I work/volunteer forces me to work harder than I can.	,662
D3 Digitalization in the organization where I work/volunteer forces me to work to tight deadlines.	,595
D4 Digitalization in the organization where I work/volunteer forces me to change my work habits and adapt to new technologies.	,644
D5 I have more work due to the increasing complexity of technology.	,660
Techno-invasion	
D6 I spend much less time with my family because of the digitalization-specific activities in the organization where I work / volunteer.	,743
D7 I have to be connected to work even during vacations because of the digitalization-specific activities in the organization where I work / volunteer.	,725
D8 I have to sacrifice time from vacation and weekends to stay up to date with new digitalization-specific activities in the organization where I work / volunteer.	,765
D9 I feel that my personal life is invaded because of the digitalization-specific activities in the organization where I work / volunteer.	,721

Techno-complexity

D10 I don't know enough about digitalization in the organization where I work / volunteer to do my job satisfactorily.	,502
D11 It takes me a long time to understand and use new digital technologies.	,699
D12. I don't find enough time to study and update my technological/digital skills.	,714
D13 I realize that new colleagues or new employees in the organization where I work/volunteer know more about technology or computers than I do.	,561
D14 I often find that new technologies are too complex for me to understand and use.	,693

Techno-insecurity

D15 I constantly feel threatened at work/volunteering because of the digitalization-specific activities in the organization.	,722
D16 I need to update my digitalization-specific skills to avoid being replaced at work/volunteering.	,705
D17 I feel threatened by colleagues who have very well-developed technological skills.	,764
D18 I feel that colleagues share much less about work because they are afraid of being replaced.	,739

Techno-uncertainty

D19 There are constantly new developments and knowledge of technology that can be used in the organization where I work/volunteer.	,692
D20 There are new changes that always appear in the development of technology of programs or applications used in the organization where I work/volunteer.	,779
D21 There are new changes that always appear in the development of equipment used in the organization where I work/volunteer.	,821
D22 There are always updates in the use of computer networks in our organization.	,741

The communalities for the items ranged from 0.50 to 0.82, indicating an adequate extraction of each item's variance by the identified factors (see Table 4). There were no items with values below 0.50 to be considered for removal in future analyses

Table 5. Reliability analysis for Technostress scale

Factor	Alpha Cronbach
Techno-overload	.83
Techno-invasion	.87
Techno-complexity	.85
Techno-insecurity	.87
Techno-uncertainty	.89

The reliability analysis indicated good internal consistency, above .80 (see Table 5). To test for all items as to whether they should be kept in the final proposal for the instrument, we test for inter-item correlations (Nunnally, 1994) to assess for a consistent pattern of associations between 0,15-0,50 values (Supplementary file Annex 1). Results indicate a good pattern of associations, and also, they are not too high to indicate an overlap of items. Furthermore, we test for the association of each item with the total score (DeVellis, 2016) of the instrument (see Table 6.).

Results indicate that all items correlate with a minimum value of 0,30. All the items are relevant for the overall structure.

Table 6. Item-Total association

Items	Corrected Item-Total Correlation
D1	,564
D2	,610
D3	,543
D4	,571
D5	,673
D6	,620
D7	,652
D8	,660
D9	,652
D10	,530
D11	,573
D12	,639
D13	,572
D14	,626
D15	,691
D16	,692
D17	,668
D18	,615
D19	,525
D20	,528
D21	,631
D22	,608

5. Discussions and concluding remarks

The present study offers a significant contribution to the psychometric validation of the Technostress Scale (Tarafdar et al., 2007) within the specific context of female social workers. By employing exploratory factor analysis (EFA), the research confirmed a robust five-factor structure, like techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity, and techno-uncertainty, each aligning with previously established theoretical models (Tarafdar et al., 2011, 2014). The high Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value and significant Bartlett's test supported the suitability of the dataset for factor analysis. The extracted factors explained 69.69% of the total variance, demonstrating the scale's strong construct validity in this sample. Reliability analysis also revealed very good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .83 to .89 for each dimension. Finally, we should also notice that the item loadings indicate strong loadings of items specific to techno-complexity and uncertainty, while the others are less loaded, indicating them as secondary factors. This adds to the extractions of factors analysis where the first factor alone accounts for a substantial proportion of the variance,

suggesting a strong underlying construct, likely corresponding to a central dimension such as techno-complexity. The gradual decrease in explained variance across the next four factors is typical in multidimensional constructs, and each factor likely captures a distinct but meaningful aspect of technostress. This should be further explored in other studies, whether it is specific to gender and type of population.

These results support the scale's applicability in assessing technostress among women in social work training programs and on the labour market, a group that has been underrepresented in previous technostress research. This is especially pertinent considering the growing body of literature that indicates gender-specific vulnerabilities to technostress. For instance, prior studies have shown that women report higher levels of techno-complexity and techno-invasion due to work-life boundary conflicts and lower perceived digital competence (La Torre et al., 2020; Gualano et al., 2023). Given that most participants in this study were early-career or student social workers, the findings emphasize the need for targeted digital skills training and stress-reduction strategies in higher education and field placements.

From a practical standpoint, these findings underline the importance of proactive organizational interventions. Institutions that train or employ social workers should consider integrating digital competence development into their curriculum and continuing professional development programs. Furthermore, organizations must recognize technostress not only as a technological issue but also as an occupational health risk, particularly for women balancing multiple social roles (Rosado et al., 2023; Estrada-Muñoz et al., 2021). Supportive workplace practices, such as clear communication policies, flexible scheduling, and peer mentoring, can help mitigate the psychological burden caused by technological demands. Ensuring access to technical support and providing psychological safety in digitally demanding roles are essential for promoting long-term well-being and professional sustainability in social work.

It is important to clarify that, to the authors' knowledge, this study represents one of the first empirical validations of the Technostress Creators Scale (Tarafdar et al., 2007) specifically among social work professionals. While the scale has been extensively applied and psychometrically validated across diverse occupational groups, including educators, healthcare workers, and students, there is limited evidence of its prior application in the social work domain, particularly among female social workers in Romania. This contextual specificity is important, given the unique demands and ethical responsibilities inherent in social work practice, which may influence the experience and manifestation of technostress differently compared to other professions. Consequently, this research offers not only a methodological contribution by confirming the instrument's reliability and factorial structure within this population, but also extends the applicability of the scale to a previously underrepresented professional context. Future comparative studies across professional domains would further clarify whether the scale retains structural invariance or requires adaptation to reflect field-specific stressors.

Concluding, the validated Technostress Scale proves to be a reliable and contextually sensitive instrument for capturing the nuanced experiences of female social workers facing digital transformation in Romania, especially for techno-complexity and techno-uncertainty. Its use can guide both research and practice in identifying at-risk individuals and developing tailored interventions. Future research may benefit from examining longitudinal changes in technostress, exploring intersectional factors such as age, socioeconomic status, and caregiving responsibilities, and testing the effectiveness of specific mitigation strategies.

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WOMEN'S JOURNEY TO GENDER EQUALITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET

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Abstract: Drawing from human capital theory and cultural lag theory, this article examines how the role of women in the labour market has been influenced from the earliest societies to the contemporary status quo. Using a thematic literature review, we present the long journey of women toward equality and dignity, beginning before the Neolithic Revolution and continuing through the Digital Age, incorporating current statistical data from Eurostat regarding the gender gap in employment and wages. Our findings reveal that despite significant advancements, structural inequalities persist, particularly among parents, highlighting the slower evolution of societal norms compared to the techno-economic transformations. Although differences between individuals are natural, including between women and men, the labour market tends to penalize working women, as the data show. Automation and Artificial Intelligence are anticipated to reshape the labour market, and create new opportunities for women, but ingrained gender disparities remain, reinforcing the tendency to revert to previous norms even after temporary shifts, such as those observed during the Covid-19 pandemic, regarding domestic responsibility sharing.

Keywords: gender equality; women's participation in the labour market; inequality of opportunity; gender wage gap; the digital age.

Résumé : S'appuyant sur la théorie du capital humain et la théorie du décalage culturel, cet article examine comment le rôle des femmes sur le marché du travail a été influencé depuis les sociétés les plus anciennes jusqu'au statu quo contemporain. À travers une revue thématique de la littérature, nous présentons le long parcours des femmes vers l'égalité et la dignité, depuis la période précédant la Révolution Néolithique jusqu'à l'Ère de la Digitalisation, en intégrant des données statistiques récentes d'Eurostat concernant les écarts de genre en matière d'emploi et de salaires. Nos résultats révèlent que, malgré des avancées significatives, des inégalités persistent, notamment parmi les parents, soulignant ainsi la lente évolution des normes sociétales par rapport aux transformations technico-économiques. Bien que les différences entre individus soient naturelles, le marché du travail tend à pénaliser les femmes actives, comme le montrent les données. L'automatisation et l'intelligence artificielle pourrait redéfinir le marché du travail et créer des opportunités pour les femmes, mais les disparités de genre profondément enracinées se maintiennent, renforçant la tendance à revenir au statu quo précédent, même après des changements temporaires, tels que ceux durant la pandémie de Covid-19, notamment en ce qui concerne le partage des responsabilités domestiques.

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Rezumat: Pornind de la teoria capitalului uman și teoria decalajului cultural, acest articol examinează modul în care rolul femeilor pe piața muncii a fost influențat din cele mai vechi societăți până la status quo-ul contemporan. Folosind o revizuire tematică a literaturii, prezentăm lunga călătorie a femeilor spre egalitate și demnitate, începând de dinaintea Revoluției Neolitice și până în Era Digitală, integrând date statistice actuale furnizate de Eurostat privind decalajul de gen în ocupare și salarii. Rezultatele noastre arată că, în ciuda progreselor, inegalitățile structurale persistă, în special în rândul părinților, subliniind faptul că normele sociale evoluează mai lent decât transformările tehnico-economice. Deși diferențele dintre indivizi sunt firești, inclusiv între femei și bărbați, piața muncii tinde să penalizeze femeile care lucrează, așa cum indică datele. Ne așteptăm ca automatizarea și inteligența artificială să transforme piața muncii și să creeze noi oportunități pentru femei, însă observăm că disparitățile de gen adânc înrădăcinate în societate se mențin, accentuând tendința de revenire la norme anterioare, chiar și după schimbări temporare, cum au fost cele din timpul pandemiei de Covid-19, în ceea ce privește împărțirea responsabilităților domestice.

Cuvinte cheie: egalitate de gen; participarea femeilor pe piața muncii; inegalitate de șanse; decalaj salarial de gen; era digitalizării.

1. Introduction

The struggle of women for their long-overdue dignity and for recognition as human beings with rights equal to those of men in society is long-standing, marked by numerous setbacks and accompanied by more significant achievements in the last century. Moreover, for hundreds of thousands of years – during the period when people were hunter-gatherers and later farmers – issues pertaining to identity and human dignity were the same for all individuals because social roles were limited to providing food and raising children, and "such societies have neither pluralism, nor diversity, nor choice" (Fukuyama, 2022, p. 53).

However, without neglecting the claims regarding the right to education, the right to work, the right to vote, and other human rights, we must consider the need for equal treatment, especially from an economic perspective. According to economic theory, people seek to maximize their gains, and it is natural to find this orientation across all social groups, including women. This predilection has been denied to women since the inception of the labour market, and even in contemporary society we still encounter instances of gender-based discrimination.

Contemporary society has made significant progress in terms of *equal opportunity in the labour market*. Women's participation in the labour market has evolved significantly throughout history, influenced by several factors such as major economic transformations, technological progress, and demographic transitions. Nevertheless, overall, *variations persist in the employment rates* between women and men. This gender gap in employment increases with the number of children and continues to persist throughout the entire professional life, even though the level of women's qualification has been steadily rising, often

surpassing that of men. Moreover, regardless of education level, marriage appears to deepen the income gap between men and women, even among employees at the same institution (Barth, Kerr, & Olivetti, 2021). Cultural traditions and gender stereotypes that assign women traditional family roles and greater responsibilities in childcare continue to influence their participation and earnings in the labour market.

If family care is performed disproportionately – being considered a woman's responsibility – this will lead, among other things, to career interruptions and a reduction in the number of hours worked. In the long run, these factors result in wage disparities and institutional discrimination by reducing women's opportunities for promotion overall. Society should recognize motherhood and early childcare as a natural part of the life cycle and ensure that women are not disadvantaged in the long term.

This article aims to analyse, from a historical perspective, the evolution of women's roles in the economy and society, highlighting the factors that have contributed to changes in the labour market. In doing so, the article contributes to the existing theoretical literature by offering a new understanding of the challenges that women face in the labour market. We ask ourselves why, despite these advances, the historical status quo of inequalities continues to persist. Furthermore, the paper intends to spark a debate on why structural changes that could ensure gender equality in the labour market are so difficult to achieve, even in the face of external pressures and major economic transformations.

Beyond the current introductory section, the article is structured in three parts. Section 2 presents the evolution of women's roles in the economy by outlining the transition through the four industrial revolutions; Section 3 presents the current state of gender equality in the labour market, including conceptualization and numerical examples at the European level. Finally, Section 4 includes a conclusion and proposals regarding the future development of this research direction.

2. The Evolution of Women's Role in the Economy

2.1. The Importance of Women from Agricultural Societies to the Digital Era

During the early matriarchy, in the Mesolithic and at the beginning of the Neolithic, the predominant activities were fishing, hunting, and gathering wild fruits. These were carried out predominantly by men, while women played an essential role in maintaining the place where children were raised and where people gathered for domestic activities. In the view of many researchers, there was no gender discrimination, as the roles within the group were naturally established and accepted. Moreover, given the role of women in procreation and child rearing, it is considered that they held a dominant position, one that men accepted as natural.

It took several thousand years for the transition from the nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a sedentary life, as farmers, to spread and gradually encompass the entire known world of that time. This change represented a significant leap in human development and is referred to by specialists as the Neolithic Revolution or the Agricultural Revolution.

The development of more complex social structures and larger groups intensified rivalries and disputes between distinct communities, each striving to protect its interests and ensure its survival. Consequently, the role of women diminished, given their less active participation in defending the group's interests, while dominant positions reverted to the men who ensured the community's survival. This evolution gradually led to men assuming the role of community leaders (Gimbutas, 1982). Once people transitioned to becoming farmers, *women began moving toward a slowly emerging labour market* as their role and participation in activities beyond strictly domestic tasks increased.

The labor market situation of women changed radically many millennia after the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution, when another revolution – the Industrial Revolution – marked a shift from the central role that women had in rural communities to a subordinate position in an industrial environment, often characterized by harsh working conditions and a lack of autonomy. Being endowed with less physical strength than men, women were forced to accept a secondary role both in the community and within the family.

Population growth led to an increased demand for goods, as well as to the diversification of the means for producing these goods. Increasing productivity through the use of machinery meant significant reductions in wage costs. Organized efforts and the involvement of capitalist investors in training and recruiting specialists to improve machines and organize production began. Yet, the development of industrial production and the trade of these goods required ever more labour, which could only come from the rural environment (Chasteen, 2024). This explains why the beginning of industrialization in England coincided with the depopulation of rural areas through the process of *enclosure*, as well as through other measures that discouraged peasants from remaining in the countryside. Gradually, small agricultural holdings were seized by large landowners – the English nobility – leaving peasants without jobs or income. They were forced to move to the suburbs of cities and find employment in the ever-increasing number of new factories. Similar processes would begin somewhat later in Germany, Belgium, France, the United States, and other countries, and in some areas only in the twentieth century.

The Industrial Revolution also meant the *development of the labour market for women*, who were forced to leave agricultural work with no alternative other than employment in a factory to supplement the family income. This meant performing exhausting work for 12–14 hours per day, six days a week, without vacation or free time. As stated by Herrmann (2023, p. 44) "monotonous machine work could also be performed by women and children, who received miserable wages".

The Second Industrial Revolution is associated with an acceleration in the development of production, transportation, and communication technologies. It is characterized by advances in the mass production of steel and, consequently, in the development of railways, coupled with the growth of the energy sector, the dawn of electricity generation and communications technologies, and the emergence of the automobile, alongside numerous other innovations in agriculture and industry. A significant contribution to increasing production efficiency – and to *expanding the labour market for women* – was made by Frederick Winslow Taylor, who laid the foundations of scientific management, particularly with the division of labour. As a result, operations that did not necessarily require physical strength were established, and these could even be performed better by women, with greater dexterity and speed. At the same time, these tasks were considered 'light work' and were paid less, which positively impacted production costs. This situation persisted for several decades. The integration of the female workforce into a framework modelled after the male workforce led to a clustering of women in sectors such as services, education, and social assistance (Jaba, 1979).

Beginning in the 1900s, in most developed countries, women started to organize and to demand shorter workweeks, as well as treatment and compensation that were fair between the sexes. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s played a significant role by increasingly raising awareness about the barriers that women faced in the labour market – including discrimination, the lack of childcare services, and limited access to education and training (Blau & Kahn, 2007; Fernández, 2013).

After World War II, technical achievements materialized in the refinement of machine tools and the introduction of automation elements in production processes, as well as in the emergence and use of electronic computers – with a remarkable impact on the diversity of product ranges, the novelty and volume, and the quality of manufactured products. These achievements are considered to represent the Third Industrial Revolution, which began in the 1960s-70s of the last century.

A Fourth Industrial Revolution (The Industry 4.0) is taking place through the merging of digital technologies with physical and biological ones, significantly favoured by the emergence of the internet. New concerns and practical applications related to the Internet of Things, data processing, Big Data, industrial robots, etc., are emerging.

Currently, there is also talk of a Fifth Industrial Revolution (The Industry 5.0) marked by close collaboration between humans and robots. However, many specialists consider that Industry 5.0 is not a new industrial revolution, but rather another stage of Industry 4.0, in which the emphasis is on harnessing the creative capacity of humans and facilitating more efficient collaboration between people and machines.

As technological advances and the restructuring of economies – dominated by the expansion of the information and services sectors – gradually increased the demand for intellectual skills at the expense of physical ones, it has become

necessary for a significant proportion of the population to be well educated (Frejka, 2008). This transformation of the labour market and the priorities of governments is making many professional activities, which until now were considered the domain of men, more accessible to women. These changes will lead to *an increase in the number of jobs available for women* and a gradual reduction in the wage differences between men and women. For example, while in 1820 the salary gap between a man and a woman in the USA was around 70%, it had reduced to 40% by 1940 (Goldin, 1990), and is currently about 20%.

2.2. The Revolution of Dignity and Equality in the labour Market

In the Declaration of Independence, drafted in 1776 by 13 American colonies, although it stated that all men are created equal, it referred only to white men and women were also excluded. The same occurred later in the Napoleonic Code, which classified women as persons without legal rights. Thus, for centuries in many traditional societies, women's work was considered inferior to men's work, and women were often paid less – or not at all – for their labour, with their responsibilities being predominantly related to managing the household and caring for children (Kucera & Tejani, 2014; Besamusca, Tijdens, Keune, & Steinmetz, 2015).

In the nineteenth century, most women were employed in domestic care and housekeeping services. Their work involved cooking, cleaning, weaving and sewing fabrics, spinning thread, and taking care of children, animals, and the garden. The majority of women active in the labour market were single, poor, and uneducated, working as domestic employees in the homes of the well-to-do or, after the emergence of workshops and factories, as farmworkers, in cases where employing men was less efficient (Standing, 2006).

Since women proved to be an essential and reliable resource for various industries during wartime, it became possible for them to continue working and to increase their participation in the labour market even after the world wars ended. As more and more women began to work, *social norms regarding gender roles started to change*. Women came to be seen as capable of contributing both to the family and to society, not just in traditional caregiving roles and through unpaid household work.

As production industries declined and the service sector grew, office work – being much less physically demanding – emerged. This development led to an increase in job opportunities in universities, hospitals, banks, and in occupations such as management, consulting, software development, and graphic design, thereby contributing to an *increase in women's participation in the labour market.* Even in the production sector, the composition of jobs changed. As companies automated or outsourced part of their services, they employed more engineers, technicians, and managers to carry out intellectual tasks that required less physical labour (Munnell & Sass, 2008).

In 1957, through the Treaty of Rome the principle of equal pay for equal work was instituted in Europe. This led to laws and policies improving working

conditions and promoting women's participation in the labour market, with childcare policies playing a significant role – although the effects varied among countries (Görges, 2021; Givord & Marbot, 2015).

Today, we expect that digitalization, artificial intelligence, and automation will facilitate the participation of women in the labour market on an equal footing with men. However, the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced many countries to rapidly implement flexible working arrangements to meet safety measures demanded by social distancing, revealed an unexpected yet important impact: during this period, with both parents working from home and limited access to childcare, even though women shared domestic responsibilities more than before, the gender gap in time spent on household and care activities remained constant. After returning to the office, traditional roles persisted, with women still handling a larger share of household duties than men, and in families where mothers continued working from home, they once again assumed the majority of domestic tasks (Dunatchik, Gerson, Glass, Jacobs, & Stritzel, 2021; Chung, Birkett, Forbes, & Seo, 2021). Although *working from home produced some positive effects*, such as increased involvement of fathers in household chores, *it did not lead to a lasting change in the distribution of domestic responsibilities*. This reflects what William Fielding Ogburn (1922) described as *cultural lag* – the idea that while material changes (e.g., teleworking technologies) occur rapidly, social norms and cultural attitudes (such as gender roles in domestic work) adapt much more slowly.

3. Current State of the Gender Equality in the labour Market

3.1. Conceptualization and Definitions

The concept of *equal opportunity* implies that aspects such as an individual's income, well-being, social mobility, or health are influenced both by personal choices and efforts, and by external circumstances, over which people have no control. These factors are classified into two categories: *effort-based factors*, such as the choice of occupation, the amount of hours worked, or investment made in human capital; and *circumstances-based factors*, such as gender, race, or an individual's socio-economic background (Roemer, 1998).

In contrast, the imbalance resulting from circumstances that are beyond one's control including gender, place of origin, family background, and social identity – reflects *inequality of opportunity*. In an economic context, this means that there are differences in income, job opportunities, and labour market participation between women and men due to factors outside their control.

In many societies, women are treated or perceived differently because of social stereotypes and cultural norms related to gender roles, and this influences their choices and decisions. Even women often feel pressured to take on additional responsibilities without being explicitly asked, as a result of the norms and expectations in their cultural context. Moreover, studies show that some companies structure their personnel policies and their compensation and benefits

schemes according to employees' characteristics, which can lead to the maintenance and perpetuation of *gender inequalities* (Kuhn, 1993).

In an economic context, one indicator of *gender inequality* that we will refer to in this paper is the *gender wage gap*, which reflects the differences in remuneration for similar or equivalent work. The gender wage gap can provide information about the degree to which women are valued compared to men, as well as the existence of gender-based inequality of opportunity. The gender wage gap is calculated using the following formula:

$$D_{wg} = \frac{\overline{Hs_m} - \overline{Hs_w}}{\overline{Hs_m}} \times 100 \qquad (1)$$

Where:
 = wage differences between genders;
 = the average gross hourly wage or earnings for men;
 = the average gross hourly wage or earnings for women.

These figures refer to the gross hourly earnings paid directly to employees before taxes and social contributions are deducted. For statistical calculations and reporting, only companies with 10 or more employees are considered.

In most societies, women – whether they have children or not – are paid less than men because many companies consider them potentially less productive due to hypothetical absences from work caused by caregiving responsibilities and because they devote more time to domestic duties (Catalyst, 2025). As a result of this generalization, *all women end up being perceived as "risky" employees*, regardless of whether they have children or not, thereby paying *"the price of being female"* (Goldin, Kerr, & Olivetti, 2024).

Specialized literature often highlights the difficulties experienced by working women by referring to a *"motherhood penalty"* (Goldin, Kerr, & Olivetti, 2024). This term describes a loss of human capital caused by interruptions in professional activity following childbirth and child-rearing, which can lead to career interruptions, the depreciation of skills, decreased productivity, and consequently lower incomes (Becker, 1991; 1985). The need for flexibility in balancing family and professional responsibilities prompts many women, after giving birth, to adopt an adaptive approach by opting for less demanding jobs – or jobs that offer working conditions favourable to the status of a mother – but with lower wages, thereby deepening the gender gap in the labour market. In some cases, this adaptation even involves leaving the labour market altogether (Hakim, 2000; Glass, 2004).

Furthermore, the gender gap persists throughout one's professional life. Motherhood has a long-lasting negative effect on women's incomes, even after several years following the birth of their first child (Hsu, 2021). Once children grow older, women typically return to a number of working hours comparable to that of men. Discrimination based on status then manifests itself as employers may view

the role of a mother as incompatible with the ideal employee image (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007), while the incomes of fathers increase when children arrive, since they are perceived as more responsible and dedicated to work (the *"fatherhood premium"*) (Goldin, Kerr, & Olivetti, 2024).

This phenomenon reveals a subtle yet profoundly unfair mechanism: *while women are penalized for motherhood (motherhood penalty), men benefit from fatherhood (fatherhood premium)*. Taken as a whole, society appears to "compensate" for the difficulties faced by women by affording men professional and financial advantages – in effect, maintaining an apparent balance at the family level. However, a closer examination shows that *this logic perpetuates inequalities*. Women, whether or not they become mothers, are perceived as being less professionally available, which negatively affects their wages, career advancement, and access to professional opportunities. Essentially, the labour market continues to operate on a model that disadvantages women and limits their professional progress.

Thus, we argue that the inequalities between women and men are not only the result of individual (effort-based) decisions made in adapting to family needs within the labour market, but also a consequence of the way the labour market rewards motherhood and fatherhood differently.

3.2. Examining the Gender Gap in Employment and Wages: Insights from EU

At the European Union (EU) level, throughout the past few decades, the gender gap in the labour market has recorded significant decreases; however, it persists and remains a challenge for many member states. This gap is reflected in various aspects of labour market participation, including employment rates, wage disparities, and economic inactivity.

Table 1 presents the current situation of EU member states based on the employment rates by gender for the 20–64 age group, offering a comparative perspective on gender gaps in labour market participation, measured in percentage points (pp).

Table 1. Employment rates by gender for the age group 20–64 at the EU level

Country	Employment rate			Difference compared to EU average (pp)	
	Men	Women	Gap (pp)	Men	Women
EU average	**80%**	**70%**	**-10**	**-**	**-**
Finland	78%	78%	0	-2	8
Lithuania	79%	78%	-1	-1	8
Estonia	83%	81%	-2	3	11
Latvia	79%	76%	-3	-1	6
France	77%	72%	-5	-3	2
Sweden	85%	80%	-5	5	10
Slovenia	80%	74%	-6	0	4
Denmark	83%	77%	-6	3	7

Country	Employment rate			Difference compared to EU average (pp)	
	Men	Women	Gap (pp)	Men	Women
EU average	**80%**	**70%**	**-10**	**-**	**-**
Portugal	81%	75%	-6	1	5
Netherlands	87%	80%	-7	7	10
Slovakia	81%	74%	-7	1	4
Bulgaria	80%	73%	-7	0	3
Luxembourg	78%	71%	-7	-2	1
Austria	81%	73%	-8	1	3
Germany	85%	77%	-8	5	7
Croatia	75%	67%	-8	-5	-3
Belgium	76%	68%	-8	-4	-2
Hungary	85%	76%	-9	5	6
Cyprus	84%	75%	-9	4	5
Ireland	84%	74%	-10	4	4
Spain	76%	65%	-11	-4	-5
Poland	84%	72%	-12	4	2
Czechia	88%	75%	-13	8	5
Malta	88%	74%	-14	8	4
Greece	77%	58%	-19	-3	-12
Italy	76%	57%	-19	-4	-13
Romania	78%	59%	-19	-2	-11

Source: Eurostat (2025a)

In graphic form, the data from the table are represented in Figure 1, which highlights the distribution of employment rates by gender among EU member states.
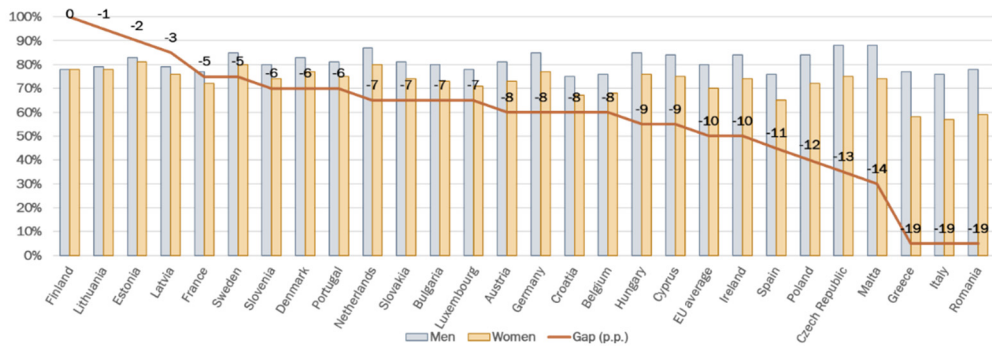
Figure 1. Gender Gaps in Employment Rates at the EU level (Age 20–64)
Data source: Eurostat (2025a)

It can be observed that the employment rate is generally higher among men compared to women, although there are significant variations among member states. Notable differences exist between states, with higher employment rates for both genders in Finland, Lithuania, and Estonia, while Greece, Italy, and Romania

record the lowest employment rates for the 20–64 age category. An analysis of the gender gap in employment indicates that these latter countries exhibit the highest values (−19%), far exceeding the EU average gap of 10 percentage points (Eurostat, 2025a).

A more pronounced gender gap suggests possible structural or cultural barriers to women's participation in the labour market. In Romania – a country similar to Italy and Greece – we see a strong influence of cultural traditions and gender stereotypes that assign women traditional family roles and greater responsibilities in child care (Zamfir, 2010; Rotariu & Voineagu, 2012; Istrate & Banica, 2015). Furthermore, the over-taxation of part-time work and the limited availability of childcare services further hinder women's access to the labour market in these countries (Catalyst, 2025).

This situation is similar in most former communist states, which were characterized by government policies that supported traditional gender roles. As a result of the transition to market economies and democratic societies, these countries have developed different approaches regarding gender policies and the labour market. For example, countries such as Czechia and Slovenia have adopted policies that promote gender equality and encourage women's participation in the labour market, achieving female employment rates of over 74%, while other states that remain anchored in traditional gender models exhibit lower employment rates among women – even when the average level of women's qualifications surpasses that of men.

In other states, gender differences in employment are smaller, indicating more effective policies for promoting gender equality in the labour market. In countries such as Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, or Latvia – where the gender gap can even reach 0% (in the case of Finland) – a strong private sector, an innovative industry, and social and cultural norms that promote gender equality and diversity contribute to greater opportunities for women's participation in the labour market.

Differences in employment rates by gender increase with the number of children. In 2024, at the EU level, the average employment rate for women with one child was 78%, compared with the employment rate for men with one child, which remained high at 92%. Men with two children registered an employment rate of 93%, while women with the same number of children recorded an employment rate of 77%.

The high employment rate among men with three or more children (88%) suggests that the majority of them continue to work – even when family responsibilities increase – compared with women with three or more children (60%), who are more likely to temporarily or permanently leave the workforce in order to take care of their family (Eurostat, 2025b).

Table 2. Average employment rate of persons (aged 25–54)
with children in the EU in 2024

Number of children	Men	Women	Gap (pp)
No children	84%	80%	4
One child	92%	78%	14

Number of children	Men	Women	Gap (pp)
Two children	93%	77%	16
Three or more children	88%	60%	28

Source: Eurostat (2025b)

These differences observed among individuals with children can be explained, among other factors, by the fact that childcare responsibilities are often disproportionately assigned to women in most countries. Similarly, the proportion of people inactive in the labour market is higher for women than for men. Among these inactive individuals, 15% are women who state that the primary reason for their inactivity is household chores or caring for children and other family members. In comparison, only 1.6% of inactive men cited the same reasons for their inactivity (Eurostat, 2017).

Another important aspect of the gender gap is the wage gap. At the EU level, according to preliminary data for 2023, women earned on average 12.0% less per hour than men, a slightly smaller gap compared to the 12.7% recorded in 2021 (European Commission, 2024). Although Finland is one of the most advanced countries in terms of gender equality, the *wage gap persists* there as well – exceeding 15%, as can be observed in Table 3.

Table 3. Gender pay gap in the EU

Country	Pay gap (national average)	Difference compared to EU average (p.p.)
Latvia	19.0%	7.0
Austria	18.3%	6.3
Czechia	18.0%	6.0
Hungary	17.8%	5.8
Germany	17.6%	5.6
Estonia	16.9%	4.9
Finland	16.8%	4.8
Slovakia	15.7%	3.7
Denmark	14.0%	2.0
Greece	13.6%	1.6
Bulgaria	13.5%	1.5
Netherlands	12.5%	0.5
France	12.2%	0.2
Cyprus	12.2%	0.2
EU-27 average	**12.0%**	
Lithuania	11.5%	-0.5
Sweden	11.2%	-0.8
Spain	9.2%	-2.8
Ireland	8.6%	-3.4
Portugal	8.6%	-3.4
Poland	7.8%	-4.2
Croatia	7.4%	-4.6
Slovenia	5.4%	-6.6
Malta	5.1%	-6.9

Country	Pay gap (national average)	Difference compared to EU average (p.p.)
Romania	3.8%	-8.2
Italy	2.2%	-9.8
Belgium	0.7%	-11.3
Luxembourg	-0.9%	-12.9

Source: Eurostat (2025c)

The average wage difference between men and women at the national level is illustrated in Figure 2, which compares the national average with the EU average.
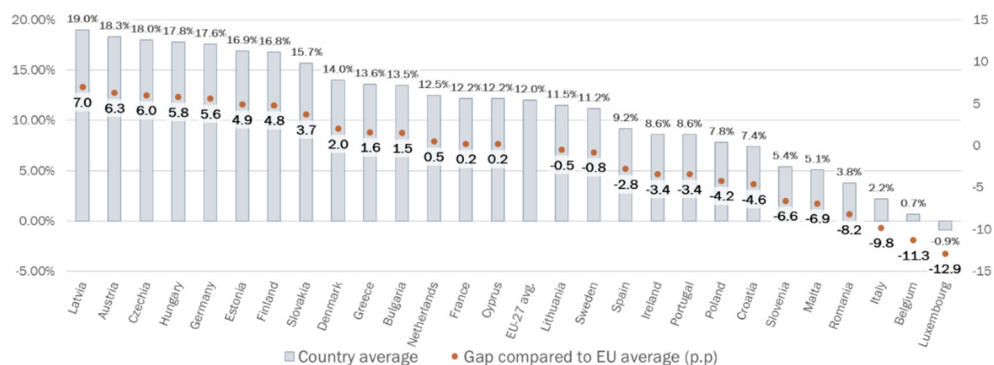
Figure 2. Gender pay gap compared to EU average
Data source: Eurostat (2025c)

The national average is an important indicator for understanding the economic characteristics of a member state and the progress made in reducing the gender wage gap. Latvia has one of the largest gender wage gaps in the EU (19%), followed by Czechia (18%), Austria (18%), Hungary (17%), and Germany (17%). Part of this difference can be explained by labour market segregation, with women occupying lower-paid positions compared to men. This phenomenon may be amplified by the lack of legislation regarding wage transparency and by systematic differences in salary growth between genders within companies.

Romania (3.8%), Italy (2.2%), or Belgium (0.7%) report very small differences in remuneration between women and men. A smaller wage gap does not necessarily indicate gender equality. This can be explained by a combination of economic, political, and social factors that include several evident differences: for example, in Romania, salaries in general are lower compared with other European countries, and as a consequence, the differences between genders are smaller. In addition, the country's economy is characterized by a large public sector, where wages are regulated by law rather than by negotiation, and by a significant number of jobs in sectors – such as education and healthcare – that, even though predominantly occupied by women, offer relatively similar pay between genders (Zamfir, 2015).

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The situation is similar outside the EU. Among OECD member countries, the gender wage gap is 12.5%, with significant variations between countries. For example, in 2020, Japan had a gap of 22.5%, while in Mexico the gender wage gap was 9.6%. In the United States, women earn approximately 18% less than men (calculated on an hourly basis) and employment rates are 10 pp lower. In the United Kingdom, the situation is similar, with a gender wage gap of 20% and an employment rate difference of 9 percentage points (Catalyst, 2025).

In most countries, women are still underrepresented and are less likely than men to pursue careers in high-paying fields (e.g., STEM) or to hold leadership positions, even when they start their careers in that field. In addition, they receive lower performance-based pay compared to the total compensation package (Valdés & Solga, 2024; Albanesi & Olivetti, 2009). Regarding the time allocated to household tasks and childcare, women in leadership roles spend more hours at home than men in the same positions (Albanesi & Olivetti, 2009).

4. Conclusion

Some women choose to temporarily withdraw from the labour market in order to devote themselves to motherhood and early childcare. This interruption, while justified from a biological perspective and accepted at a socio-cultural level, should not give rise to a predisposition to penalize women in the labour market.

The aim of the current paper was to analyse, from a historical perspective, the evolution of women's roles in the economy and society, highlighting the factors that have contributed to changes in the labour market. In this endeavour, the study begins with a chronological presentation of the evolution of women's roles in society and, subsequently, in the labour market throughout the transition through the four industrial revolutions. It has been noted that during the era of early matriarchy and the Neolithic, women occupied a central role – indeed, even superior to that of men – in the context of hunter-gatherer societies.

In the context of the First Industrial Revolution, women were forced to join men in the labour market. Being endowed with less physical strength than men, their work was considered less valuable. However, this transition represented a crucial moment in women's economic emancipation, constituting the premise for later claims for gender equality in the professional realm. The Second Industrial Revolution further deepened the wage disparities between the sexes. The increasingly rigid division of production activities assigned 'light work' to women, which was paid less, compared to occupations dominated by men. This professional segregation contributed to the perpetuation of an inequitable socio-economic structure in which women were confined to inferior positions both economically and socially, thus reinforcing the patriarchal gender stereotypes that persist in many societies even today.

With the automation of production and the technological advancements brought by the Third Industrial Revolution, the feminist movements during that period helped partially balance the situation in the labour market. Physical strength, previously an essential criterion in numerous fields of activity, lost much

of its relevance. On one hand, increased access to education and the digitalization that gained momentum during the Fourth Industrial Revolution facilitated the involvement of women in fields previously dominated by men, giving them the opportunity to occupy better-paying positions and actively participate in innovation processes. On the other hand, occupational segregation continued to manifest, with women still overrepresented in sectors that typically offer lower wages, such as education, healthcare, or administrative services. Although technological progress and a more flexible working environment have laid the foundation for greater equal opportunities, the reality of the labour market has shown that gender stereotypes and traditional values continue to persist.

Statistical data on the gender gap in employment and wages at the EU level reveal that women continue to have lower employment rates and, on average, earn less than men. This employment gap widens as the number of children increases, reflecting the disproportionate impact of family responsibilities on women's participation in the labour market.

In most countries, employers tend to perceive women as "risky" employees, as they are considered more likely to experience career interruptions and to prioritize family responsibilities over professional ones, which can affect their earnings, access to leadership positions, and opportunities for advancement (the "motherhood penalty"). In parallel, a man who becomes a father is perceived as having a higher professional commitment, being motivated to secure greater financial stability for the family (the "fatherhood bonus"). This generalization penalizes all women, due to prevailing social expectations regarding gender roles.

Although the industrial revolutions were determining factors in changing the role of women in society and subsequently in the labour market, this paper does not exhaustively cover the influences of other factors, such as policies or the legislative framework. Future empirical studies could provide a clearer understanding of how work schedule flexibilization and the balancing of family responsibilities influence, in the long term, the distribution of tasks between men and women. Furthermore, research could analyse the impact of these measures on wage equity and opportunities for professional advancement, in order to determine the extent to which a paradigm shift in the management of family responsibilities would contribute to a true equalization of women's participation in the labour market.

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VULNERABILITIES AND INEQUALITIES FACED BY CHILDREN WITH IMPRISONED PARENTS: CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS AND STRATEGIES TO ENSURE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract: A significant number of children around the world are affected by separation from one or both parents as a result of the latter's incarceration. This article, a theoretical synthesis, aims to explore the impact of parental imprisonment on children from the perspective of legal sociology. It highlights the multiple challenges and vulnerabilities faced by children throughout the different stages of the criminal justice process involving their parents, as well as the ways in which the state, society and individuals can actively contribute to reducing stigmatization, discrimination and social inequalities affecting these children. The analysis draws on international scholarly literature, institutional reports, and empirical studies, selected based on their relevance and timeliness. Breaking cycles of inequality and alleviating the negative consequences experienced by children separated from incarcerated parents requires a paradigm and perspective shift, involving specialists, individuals and society as a whole. Social, psychological and educational support, together with inter-institutional co-operation and legal reforms, are essential to harmonise opportunities for children affected by parental detention. Reducing disparities and combating discrimination and stigmatisation is not only a moral obligation, but also a fundamental condition for an inclusive society that provides every child with support, protection and equal opportunities, regardless of the legal status of the family.

Keywords: children of prisoners, vulnerabilities, inequalities, stigmatisation, support, inclusion.

Résumé : Un nombre significatif d'enfants à travers le monde sont affectés par la séparation d'avec l'un ou les deux parents à la suite de l'incarcération de ces derniers. Cet article, une synthèse théorique, vise à explorer l'impact de l'emprisonnement parental sur les enfants du point de vue de la sociologie juridique. Il met en évidence les multiples défis et vulnérabilités auxquels les enfants sont exposés aux différentes étapes de la procédure pénale intentée contre leurs parents, ainsi que les moyens par lesquels l'État, la société et les individus peuvent coopérer activement pour réduire la stigmatisation, la discrimination et les inégalités sociales auxquelles ces enfants sont confrontés. L'analyse est basée sur la littérature internationale, les rapports et la recherche empirique, sélectionnés sur la base de leur pertinence et de leur actualité. Pour briser les cycles d'inégalité et atténuer les conséquences négatives subies par les enfants séparés de leurs parents incarcérés, il faut

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changer de paradigme et de perspective, en impliquant les spécialistes, les individus et la société dans son ensemble. Le soutien social, psychologique et éducatif, accompagné de la coopération interinstitutionnelle et des réformes juridiques, est essentiel pour harmoniser les chances des enfants affectés par la détention parentale. La réduction des disparités et la lutte contre la discrimination et la stigmatisation ne sont pas seulement une obligation morale, mais aussi une condition fondamentale pour une société inclusive qui offre à chaque enfant soutien, protection et égalité des chances, quel que soit le statut juridique de la famille.

Mots-clés : enfants de détenus, vulnérabilités, inégalités, stigmatisation, soutien, inclusion.

Abstract: Un număr semnificativ de copii din întreaga lume sunt afectați de separarea de unul sau ambii părinți ca urmare a încarcerării acestora din urmă. Acest articol, de tip sinteză teoretică, își propune să exploreze impactul detenției părinților asupra copiilor, din perspectiva sociologiei juridice. Sunt evidențiate provocările și vulnerabilitățile multiple la care sunt expuși copiii în diferitele etape ale procesului penal intentat părinților, precum și modalitățile prin care statul, societatea și indivizii pot conlucra activ la reducerea stigmatizării, discriminării și inegalităților sociale față de acești copii. Analiza are la bază literatura internațională de specialitate, rapoarte și cercetări empirice, selecționate pe criterii de relevanță și actualitate. Pentru întreruperea ciclurilor de inegalitate și atenuarea consecințelor negative resimțite de copiii separați de părinții încarcerați este necesară schimbarea paradigmelor și a perspectivelor, cu implicarea specialiștilor, a fiecărui individ și a societății în ansamblul ei. Sprijinul social, psihologic și educațional, alături de cooperarea interinstituțională și reformele juridice, sunt esențiale pentru a echilibra șansele copiilor afectați de detenția părinților. Reducerea disparităților și combaterea discriminării și stigmatizării reprezintă nu doar o obligație morală, ci și o condiție fundamentală pentru o societate incluzivă, care asigură fiecărui copil sprijin, protecție și șanse egale, indiferent de statutul juridic al familiei.

Cuvinte cheie: copiii deținuților, vulnerabilități, inegalități, stigmatizare, sprijin, incluziune.

1. Introduction

Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) estimates that approximately 2.1 million children in Europe have a parent in prison at any given time. Children with incarcerated parents represent one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society, frequently overlooked by national social and educational policies. At the same time, judicial systems - which are primarily focused on offenders - tend to ignore the collateral consequences of imprisonment on the children of incarcerated parents (COPE, 2021a; Council of Europe, 2022; European Commission, 2021).

Thus, although they have committed no crime, these children suffer the consequences of their parents' actions. They are exposed to numerous vulnerabilities and various forms of stigmatization and discrimination, which may significantly hinder their social, educational and emotional development, thereby perpetuating inequality and social exclusion (Arditti, 2012; Condry & Smith, 2018; Syauqila & Kaloeti, 2024; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2014).

This article, conceived as a theoretical synthesis, aims to explore the impact of parental incarceration on children from a socio-legal perspective, with a focus on the vulnerabilities and risks associated not only with the incarceration itself, but also with the various procedural stages of the criminal justice process involving the parent. Experiences such as house searches and the arrest of a parent, both carried out through violent means and without regard for the presence of children, barriers to maintaining the parent - child relationship during the parent's detention, social stigmatisation, the lack of adequate psychological and material support, and the absence of inter-institutional intervention protocols all contribute to deepening the trauma experienced by these children (COPE, 2021b; Simmons et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the study underlines the need to break cycles of inequality and to mitigate the negative consequences experienced by children separated from incarcerated parents. Achieving this goal requires a paradigm shift involving professionals, individuals, and society as a whole, along with comprehensive legal, social, and educational support systems rooted in equity, inclusion, and child protection.

The paper aims to propose directions for systemic and individual interventions and to raise awareness among professionals in the social, educational, and legal fields, encouraging them to take an active role in breaking the cycles of disadvantage affecting children with incarcerated parents. It is essential that these children are no longer treated as "invisible," and that their protection becomes a genuine priority in public policies.

The study draws on relevant academic sources, institutional reports, and recent empirical research, selected based on criteria of timeliness, thematic relevance, and scientific validity. The structure begins with an overview of the context, followed by an analysis of the different stages of the criminal justice process initiated against the parent, which serves as a framework for highlighting the specific vulnerabilities and challenges faced by children at each point. The following sections examine how parental detention affects children, contributes to the perpetuation of multiple forms of disadvantage, and identify possible roles and intervention strategies.

2. Background

Globally, unprecedented numbers of people are incarcerated and in many countries detention is on the rise (Okereke, 2013). Proportionately, the number of children whose parents are in detention is also increasing.

The actual number of children with incarcerated parents is difficult to establish due to under-reporting and the absence of systematic data collection. Lack of knowledge of the true extent of the phenomenon of separation of children from their imprisoned parents, coupled with insufficient knowledge of their negative experiences is reflected in the lack of policies and programmes to support and intervene with this vulnerable group (Condry & Smith, 2018).

Romania is not spared from this issue, recording an increase in the incarceration rate between 2018 and 2024 of around 11.71 percent (Fair & Walmsley, 2021; Fair & Walmsley, 2024), without the exact number of children affected by separation from their incarcerated parents being known.

In a study conducted by the Romanian NGO Alternative Sociale in 2015, it was established that 16,764 children had one or both parents in detention, 39 percent of those incarcerated were parents of at least one child, and of these, 68 percent had two or more children. Only 867 children were being assisted by child protection services, and mapping the areas with the most children separated from their parents as a result of incarceration revealed that Bucharest, Constanța and Iași had the most children with detained parents.

In the absence of systematic data collection, estimates are the only available method for assessing the number of children with incarcerated parents in recent years. According to COPE (2021a), approximately 28,306 children in Romania had a parent in detention in 2021. This estimate is based on data from the Council of Europe's SPACE I Programme, which reported a prison population of 21,774 in Romania in 2021 (Aebi et al., 2022, Table 3, p. 26). The estimated number of children with a parent in detention was derived by applying a rate of 1.3 children per incarcerated individual, as suggested by Cassan (2002).

The data provided by the Romanian National Penitentiary Administration (2025) show that in April 2025, there were 24,544 persons deprived of their liberty in Romanian detention centres. Applying the same parenthood rate of 1.3 children per incarcerated individual (Cassan, 2002), it is estimated that approximately 31,907 Romanian children were affected by the separation from one or both parents due to imprisonment during the same reference period.

It is of concern that in Romania the average length of custodial sentences served is approximately 24.8 months, among the highest in Europe (Aebi et al., 2022, p. 15), which implies an extended period of separation between the affected children and their incarcerated parents.

Regardless of geographic context, however, as Liz Gordon (2021, p. 4) emphasised, "the experiences of children in prison are very similar across nations and jurisdictions, despite the many differences in numbers and prison systems."

Parental incarceration is documented to be a negative experience in itself for many children, which also exposes them to other possible collateral traumatic consequences such as separation anxiety, emotional distress, physical and mental health conditions, increased impoverishment, family and relationship dysfunction, stigmatisation, discrimination, and social exclusion. In addition, they may experience educational difficulties, alcohol or drug misuse, behavioural problems, and even contact with the criminal justice system (Arditti, 2012; Järvinen et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2012).

Separation from one or both parents may occur during the criminal proceedings initiated against the parent, either in the context of pre-trial detention or subsequently, following the imposition of a custodial sentence.

Legal proceedings initiated against a parent in conflict with the criminal law can affect children, because each stage of the judicial process generates specific vulnerabilities for children, who directly experience the consequences of the actions or inactions of the authorities, without their needs being adequately taken into account. Adele Jones (2017) has expressed by the phrase "blind justice for children" how children are harmed and ignored by the system at every stage of the judicial process brought against the parent, from arrest, through the criminal trial, and following incarceration to serve their sentence.

As can be seen from the table of contents of this article, at the various stages of the criminal proceedings brought against the parent, children are exposed to numerous vulnerabilities and various forms of stigmatisation and discrimination, which can negatively affect their health, opportunities and well-being, perpetuating social inequalities (Condry & Smith, 2019; Syauqila & Kaloeti, 2024).

3. Evidentiary procedures and taking preventive measures

A house search, as part of an evidentiary procedure, can constitute a traumatic first encounter with the justice system. Children often experience intense fear, confusion and distress as they witness the sudden and forceful entry of law enforcement officers into their home, typically early in the morning or, conversely, in the late hours, accompanied by loud and intrusive searches for evidence related to criminal offences and the seizure of personal property (Condry & Smith, 2019).

It is possible that, in those circumstances, children may witness their parent being slammed to the ground, immobilised and handcuffed, orders given in a harsh, violent tone, without the needs and rights of the children being provided for or considered by members of the investigation team. Nell Bernstein emphasises that "for many children, a parent's arrest is the moment when their invisibility becomes visible" (*apud* COPE, 2021b, p. 1), a visibility that is often painful, unwanted and stigmatising.

The experience of witnessing the arrest of one or both parents arouses a wide range of reactions, emotions and feelings: shock and fear as a result of witnessing violent acts; confusion and concern for the well-being of the parent; feelings of abandonment and loss of hope; reactions of guilt for the parent's offence and shame felt as a result of the stigma of having someone arrested (Condry & Smith, 2019; COPE, 2021a; Tijerina & Tijerina, 2021).

Phillips and Zhao (2010) suggest that those children who have witnessed a parent being arrested are 73 percent more likely to develop higher symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder than those who have not experienced the arrest.

The interaction of law enforcement with these children is defining for their subsequent relationship with the police or "authority" in general (COPE, 2021b). Currently, there are no clearly defined procedures for conducting arrests in a way that takes into account the needs of children whose parents are in conflict with the criminal law. Similarly, there are no established protocols for collaboration

between the police, child protection authorities, social services and schools to ensure a consistent and effective cross-sectoral approach. This lack of coordination can lead to situations where children are traumatised through direct exposure to their parents' arrest, without adequate support or protection from the inherent emotional and psychological effects of these experiences. In most cases, the quality of interactions between law enforcement officials and the children of individuals in conflict with the criminal law relies more on the personal experience, goodwill, and innate interpersonal skills of police officers than on the use of child-sensitive procedures or competencies acquired through specialised training. Such training would ideally consider the potential psychological impact of trauma on children (COPE, 2021b).

In the same context, an additional source of stress is the placement of children, whose primary or sole carer is arrested, in a form of special protection (foster care or emergency placement) and the uncertainty of the child as to what will happen to them in the future. The impact of a parent's arrest extends beyond the immediate event because when a child is placed in substandard care or, in extreme cases, when a child is left unattended, this can pose a significant danger to the child's safety and well-being (COPE, 2021b).

Moreover, in the situation of arrest, in addition to the abrupt absence of the parent, the child also faces a lack of age-appropriate information about what will happen to the arrested parent and how long the parent will be missing. It is an extremely stressful time of maximum uncertainty, likely to distress both children and adult family members (Condry & Smith, 2019).

Researchers studying families involved in the criminal justice system have conceptualised parental incarceration as a type of "ambiguous loss", characterized by the physical absence of the parent alongside their continued psychological presence. This type of loss is unresolved, confusing, and deeply distressing, as it lacks the clarity or information needed for children to experience closure or to integrate the loss into their emotional lives (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2021).

Moreover, pre-trial detention is usually accompanied, for reasons related to the tactics of the criminal proceedings, by a ban on contact, with limited communication between those under criminal investigation and their families.

Financial difficulties arise or worsen, caused by the cessation of the arrested person's sources of income, but also due to additional expenses incurred by the family for the person placed in state custody (expenses related to providing necessary legal assistance, travelling to court hearings, visits to the place of detention, food and clothing packages etc.).

4. The stage of court proceedings and sentencing to imprisonment

The period when the criminal proceedings against the parent are being judged is also a stage with a strong emotional impact. Children may feel powerless in their desire to help their parent or to make their voice heard in relation to their

parent's conviction. Despite the direct impact that parental sentencing has on children, courts frequently disregard their right to be heard (Smith, 2018).

Social and financial hardship tends to intensify over time, as prolonged court proceedings generally result in a greater socio-economic burden on detainees and their families, particularly when individuals are taken into custody during the course of the trial process (Schönteich, 2021).

The moment when the parent is sentenced to a custodial sentence leads to important changes. There are changes in family structure, loss of opportunities and social status, as well as the exposure of children to the stigma of having a parent in detention. Family members face long-term separation, depending on the severity of the sentence, and children may feel abandoned by the incarcerated parent with whom they can no longer share the important moments in their lives. No matter how complicated the children's lives were, the incarceration of the parent is felt as a great loss, even associated with the mourning period (Tijerina & Tijerina, 2021).

Some families face the dilemma of whether to disclose or conceal the fact of a parent's incarceration from their children, other family members or the community. However, Long et al. (2022) draw attention to the consequences of a lack of transparency, which can fuel a child's sense of not having someone trustworthy around them. In addition, such behaviour deepens children's invisibility, thus depriving them of the material or psychological support they are in such great need of.

5. Prison visits and reintegration

Visiting an incarcerated parent at their place of detention can be another potentially traumatic experience for children. The contact with the prison space (usually large, grey buildings surrounded by high fences and barbed wire), with rigid internal rules that are incomprehensible to young children (strict visiting hours that do not take into account the children's availability or schedule, prohibition of physical touching, etc.) and security procedures specific to places of detention (body searches in conditions that do not take into account the vulnerability of minors in a context that is doubly vulnerable) can negatively imprint both the parent-child relationship and the underdeveloped psyche of children and can be as negative experiences, feelings and emotions for them (Aiello & McCorkel, 2018).

Nonetheless, researchers emphasize the mutual benefits of maintaining the parent-child relationship when there is no compelling reason to restrict it. For incarcerated parents, strong family bonds cultivated during imprisonment are associated with a reduced risk of recidivism and more successful social reintegration after release (Condry & Smith, 2018). At the same time, children benefit from such sustained connections by exhibiting fewer behavioural problems, lower levels of stress, reduced substance misuse, and improved academic performance (Kjellstrand et al., 2020).

Despite these advantages, maintaining the parent-child relationship can be challenging or may not occur at all due to long distances, financial constraints that

prevent travel to the detentional facility, or the other parent's decision to sever ties with the incarcerated parent.

Although the Romanian prison system allows for online communication between prisoners and their family members, bureaucratic procedures and limitations considerably reduce the accessibility of this right. Moreover, effective access to these online communications requires family members to have an internet connection and adequate technical means, which can be an additional obstacle, especially in the case of families in situations of social or economic vulnerability.

The reintegration of the parent into the family relationship after release from detention can also present a number of challenges, especially if the detention has been over a long period of time. A renegotiation of roles takes place, issues of insufficient living space, lack of employment, increased social stigmatisation may arise, which in turn negatively imprints children (Condry & Smith, 2019).

6. The negative impact of parental detention on children

The literature highlights that children are exposed to multiple vulnerabilities and risks throughout the entire trajectory of parental incarceration: from sentencing, through the period of detention, and even after release. The negative consequences for children include psychological and emotional distress, stigmatisation, tendency toward secrecy and social isolation, disruptions in educational pathways, behavioural problems, economic hardship, discrimination, and the perpetuation of social inequalities – which can undermine the child's physical and mental health, well-being, and long-term development (Condry & Smith, 2019; Jones & Wainaina-Woźna, 2013; Luther, 2023).

Parental incarceration is listed among the top 10 adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) – potentially traumatizing events occurring between the ages of 0 and 17 – that significantly impact a child's physical, mental, and behavioural development (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The cumulative presence of such experiences is associated with reduced life span and increased risk of developing physical and mental health problems over the course of one's life (Felitti *et al.*, 1998).

Research from the COPING project (2010−2012), which included Romania, found that children with incarcerated parents face a 25-50 percent higher risk of developing mental health problems (particularly the children over the age of 11). For Romania, the COPING project marked the first systematic attempt to document the needs and experiences of children affected by parental incarceration.

In a recent review of the literature, Syauqila & Kaloeti (2024) also show that the predominant impact of parental incarceration manifests itself in the *mental health* of children, where various affective and behavioural manifestations interact, amplify and condition each other.

Parental incarceration has become an identifiable source of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in children, with manifestations such as depression, anger, aggression, self-isolation and self-harm behaviours (Morgan-

Mullane, 2018). The trauma of parental separation is often accompanied by feelings of shame, stigma and emotional insecurity, all of which contribute to creating a breeding ground for the onset of depression and anxiety (Johnson et al, 2018; Kremer et al., 2020), decreased self-esteem (Kjellstrand et al., 2020), social withdrawal, and even suicidal tendencies (Pfluger et al., 2023). In some cases, developmental delays may occur (Marie-Mitchell et al., 2019) or dysfunctional defence mechanisms such as narcissism and emotional insensitivity may be activated (Li & Ang, 2019), further complicating the psychosocial adjustment of these children.

Emotional distress is often exacerbated by the *social stigma* associated with parental incarceration, which also contributes to significant difficulties in the social and educational integration of affected children (Besemer *et al.*, 2019). Children fear negative labels from their communities, and the fear of being labelled as "children of offenders" can discourage them from participating in educational and community activities, exacerbating feelings of isolation and the risk of social exclusion, especially when social or institutional support is insufficient.

While separation caused by parental incarceration can be as painful as other forms of parental loss (such as death or divorce), it can be further complicated by the stigma, ambiguity and lack of social support and compassion that accompany it (Arditti, 2012; Kramer & Burton, 2021).

Stigmatisation manifested in the social environment is often accompanied by the *discriminatory social treatment* to which children are subjected (Long et al., 2022; Morgan et al., 2021). Many individuals and institutions associate parental incarceration with criminal tendencies, assuming that their children will follow a similar pattern. Educational institutions, which should serve as a support system, sometimes contribute to the discrimination these children face. Unconsciously, teachers may have low expectations of academic success for a child with parents in detention, assuming that the child does not receive adequate parental guidance, just as they may assume that the child will also exhibit behavioural problems (Wildeman et al., 2017).

Also, the accumulation of adverse childhood experiences, such as parental incarceration, has over time been significantly associated with *children's behavioural problems*, including various *forms of contact with the criminal justice system.*

A review of research on the likelihood of children with incarcerated parents becoming involved in the justice system highlights both the limitations of previous studies that did not take into account the overlap of pre-existing risk factors specific to vulnerable family backgrounds (such as low socio-economic status, poor access to education, family instability or lack of support networks, structural inequalities) as well as the unintended consequences of these findings, which, rather than supporting children with parents in detention, risk amplifying their stigmatisation (Adalist-Estrin, 2021, Conway&Jones, 2015). According to recent reviews of internationally representative studies, approximately 32.8

percent of children affected by parental incarceration come into contact with the justice system (Keays Yeager et al., 2021).

There are also studies that emphasise correlations between parental incarceration and *difficulties in educational attainment* (Fox et al., 2023; Murray at al., 2012). According to them, parental imprisonment may predict poorer school outcomes for their children, both in the short and long term, as well as a higher likelihood for children to drop out of school. Anxiety, depression or social stigmatisation can affect concentration and motivation at school, and financial difficulties following incarceration can limit children's access to appropriate educational resources (textbooks, tutoring, extracurricular activities) or affect their ability to attend school. In addition, the absence of direct educational support from the incarcerated parent, combined with the increased burden placed on the parent remaining at home (who must take on both their own responsibilities and those of the detained parent) can lead to difficulties in supporting the child's education, or even to its neglect.

McCauley (2020) even suggests that parental incarceration may also lead to increased risk of dropping out of school as well as to *the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantage.*

The incarceration of a parent can also generate *family dysfunction* as a result of physical and emotional separation between parents and children (Syauqila & Kaloeti, 2024). Significant economic and social consequences, such as financial insecurity and housing instability, contribute to increased parental stress and risk of depression (Morgan et al., 2021), as well as an increased likelihood of marital relationship breakdown. Single mothers, in particular, tend to initiate new relationships, which can accentuate instability within the family, and children frequently end up being raised by grandparents or other carers (Turney & Haskins, 2019).

7. The cycle of multiple disadvantages

Parental imprisonment often overlaps with poverty, discrimination and limited access to educational resources, creating a cycle of multiple disadvantage for children. The stigma of having a parent in prison extends beyond childhood, affecting future employment opportunities and social mobility, as individuals with a history of family incarceration often face systemic barriers in higher education and the labour market, and social disparities fuel intergenerational inequalities (Condry & Smith, 2018).

The lack of targeted interventions and support programmes worsens the situation of these children, isolating them and leaving them to struggle alone to overcome personal and educational obstacles. Social services and the justice system do not adequately take into account the specific needs of these children (lack of consistent material support, psychological counselling and emotional support, limited access and visitation rights for incarcerated parents, punitive penal policies that do not take into account the collateral effects of parental detention), limiting their opportunities.

Also, the lack of professional specialisation of community social workers leads to the provision of social benefits without guiding families to reduce the causes of poverty, thus contributing to keeping these families vulnerable. At the same time, a complete failure to address emotional difficulties, problems with school performance and attendance or poor peer relationships can create additional barriers for children facing separation from incarcerated parents (Foca, 2017).

Highlighting the severity of the social and emotional risks to which they are exposed, Luther (2015) points out that children with parents in detention are among the most defenceless populations in the world. When a child grows up in an environment characterised by poverty, social exclusion, stigmatisation and limited access to education and support resources, their chances of overcoming this condition become significantly lower – particularly in the absence of active public policies for intervention and protection.

8. Intervention roles and strategies

Reducing the risks and effectively managing the challenges faced by children with parents in detention requires a multidimensional approach, involving structural interventions, community education, and policy and legislative reforms. Syauqila & Kaloeti (2024) suggest that the provision of supportive social programmes is an essential first step in building resilience of children with incarcerated parents, as they have a heightened need for psychosocial support and protective relational environments. The ability of these children to cope with adversity is profoundly influenced by the quality of social interactions and the attitudes of those around them (extended family, teachers, peers or professionals in the field of child protection or interacting with the child in their roles) that can significantly contribute to the development of their internal coping resources and the prevention of the negative effects of stigmatisation (Kjellstrand et al., 2020).

To this end, the training of professionals is a key component of institutional interventions aimed at reducing the adverse effects on vulnerable children, particularly those with incarcerated parents.

The school could be one of the main promoters in reducing stigmatisation of children with detained parents, by implementing inclusive policies and training educators to support, rather than stigmatise children who have parents in detention.

Collaboration between social services and schools could lead to the introduction or expansion of mentoring programmes that provide affected children with the necessary emotional and educational resources. Involving children in additional activities that support their hobbies and interests, outside school hours, can contribute to increased self-esteem and make them feel empowered (Syauqila & Kaloeti, 2024), and is also a protective factor in combating loneliness and isolation, poor school performance and delinquency (Kremer et al., 2020).

Support from social services and civil society to keep families together can also have significant emotional and social benefits. For prisoners, the bond with

family members contributes to an easier reintegration into society, reduces the likelihood of recidivism and gives them a strong motivation to change their lives. For children, these relationships can provide greater emotional stability and continuity of essential emotional bonds (Condry & Smith, 2018).

Community-based interventions could also educate others about the impact of stigma on children of prisoners (Long, 2022).

Legislative reforms to include mandatory best interests of the child assessments into the criminal proceedings against parents could lead to the wider application of alternatives to detention by the judiciary for parents who are the primary or sole carers of the child.

9. Conclusion

Parental incarceration has long-term consequences for the children of incarcerated parents, representing a source of emotional, social, educational and economic imbalance. Children of offenders are exposed, as collateral victims, to a range of traumas and vulnerabilities from the onset of the parent's criminal case to their release from custody and beyond, suffering the effects of stigmatisation, family breakdown, economic instability or institutional impoverishment and marginalisation.

Without specialised interventions, these children risk being trapped in a vicious cycle of multiple disadvantages that can negatively affect their health, developmental pathways, social and emotional balance, opportunities and well-being.

Psychological, educational and social support, changing mentalities, together with inclusive public policies and inter-institutional collaboration, are essential to guarantee equal opportunities and to ensure that the society we live in does not punish children for crimes they did not commit.

The situation of children with parents in detention can no longer be treated as an invisible social problem. It must be recognised as a matter of social justice and equity in the protection of children's rights, and tackling the stigmatisation of these children is not just a moral responsibility, but a condition for a fair and just society (COPE, 2021a).

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SOCIAL REINTEGRATION OF PRISONERS THROUGH WORK. PRISON PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

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Abstract: This research explores how work activities carried out in Oradea Penitentiary contribute to the resocialization of inmates, highlighting the collaboration between the prison system and the private sector. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study is based on interviews with nine prison police officers and two local entrepreneurs directly involved in prisoners' labour activities. The study thus identifies mechanisms through which work serves not only as a disciplinary tool but also as a mediator between prison life and social reintegration. Partnerships with companies can generate reciprocal benefits, both financial and as a means of acquiring new professional qualifications, while employers gain access to a stable workforce. However, obstacles such as stigmatization, post-release difficulties (lack of ID documents/shelter), and rigid legal frameworks undermine the potential for post-release social reintegration. The conclusions emphasize the need for efficient inter-institutional coordination where authorities, employers, and the community ensure facilitation of the reintegration process.

Keywords: prison system, social reintegration, offenders, prison labor, public-private partnership, prison legislation, recidivism.

Résumé : Cette recherche explore comment les activités de travail menées à la prison d'Oradea contribuent à la resocialisation des détenus, en mettant en lumière la collaboration entre le système pénitentiaire et le secteur privé. Adoptant une approche qualitative, l'étude est basée sur des entretiens avec neuf agents de la police pénitentiaire et deux entrepreneurs locaux directement impliqués dans les activités de travail des prisonniers. Ainsi, l'étude identifie les mécanismes par lesquels le travail sert non seulement d'outil disciplinaire, mais aussi de médiateur entre la vie carcérale et la réinsertion sociale. Les partenariats avec des entreprises peuvent générer des bénéfices réciproques : à la fois financiers et comme moyen d'acquérir de nouvelles qualifications professionnelles, tandis que les employeurs accèdent à une main-d'œuvre stable. Toutefois, des obstacles tels que la stigmatisation, les difficultés post-libération (manque de papiers d'identité/logement) et la rigidité du cadre juridique compromettent le potentiel de réinsertion sociale après la libération. Les conclusions soulignent la nécessité d'une coordination interinstitutionnelle efficace permettant aux autorités, employeurs et communauté de faciliter le processus de réintégration.

Mots-clés : système pénitentiaire, réinsertion sociale, détenus, travail pénitentiaire, partenariat public-privé, législation pénitentiaire, opportunités légitimes, récidive.

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Rezumat: Această cercetare explorează modul în care activitățile de muncă desfășurate în Penitenciarul Oradea contribuie la resocializarea deținuților, evidențiind colaborarea dintre sistemul penitenciar și sectorul privat. Adoptând o abordare calitativă, studiul se bazează pe interviuri realizate cu nouă polițiști de penitenciar și doi antreprenori locali implicați direct în activitățile lucrative ale deținuților. Astfel, studiul identifică mecanismele prin care munca servește nu doar ca instrument disciplinar, ci și ca mediator între viața carcerală și reinserția socială. Parteneriatele cu companii pot genera beneficii reciproce, atât de natură financiară, cât și mijloc de dobândire a unor noi calificări profesionale, în timp ce angajatorii au acces la forță de muncă stabilă. Totuși, obstacole precum stigmatizarea, dificultățile post-eliberare (lipsa actelor/adăpostului) și rigiditatea cadrului legal subminează potențialul reintegrării sociale post liberare. Concluziile evidențiază necesitatea unei coordonări eficiente interinstituționale prin care autoritățile, angajatorii și comunitatea să asigure facilitarea procesului de reintegrare.

Cuvinte cheie: sistem penitenciar, reintegrare socială, deținuți, muncă penitenciară, parteneriat public-privat, legislația penitenciară, oportunități legitime, recidivă.

1. Introduction

Social reintegration of ex-prisoners remains a major challenge for the prison system. In the Romanian context, where recidivism continues to challenge the effectiveness of resocialization measures, this paper explores a concrete aspect: the role of work activities carried out by prisoners during the execution of custodial sentences. The study investigates how work becomes a framework of control and resocialization, but also a bridge towards reintegration into society, analysing the partnerships of Oradea Penitentiary with companies such as Valtryp or Cargus – companies involved in the production of steering wheels or logistics.

Based on Foucault's theoretical perspectives on disciplinary mechanisms (1991) and Goffman's concept of total institutions (1961) , the research investigates how work can become a framework of social control and resocialization, but also a bridge that facilitates reintegration into society. A local employer summarized this ambivalence: "They come here to learn a trade, but also to become human again".

The aim of the research is to assess the impact of prison-private sector partnerships on prisoners' employment opportunities and to identify factors that help or hinder their preparation for post-release social reintegration. Based on qualitative data collected between 2023 and 2025, this study uses in-depth interviews with nine penitentiary staff and two business partners involved in inmate labour programs to explore the phenomenon's complexity.

I would like to emphasize the need for a reconceptualization of prison work – not as a mere extension of punishment, but as a process of identity reconstruction. While partnerships with private firms open doors to the outside world, they do not remove obstacles such as lack of identification and shelter or the reluctance of employers to hire those with criminal records. The article therefore offers a critical reflection on how public policies could transform these one-off initiatives into a coherent reintegration system.

2. Theoretical framework

In this research I follow aspects of prisoners' lives in the prison environment, explicitly their involvement in work while in detention. The theoretical framework used in the documentation and analysis was based on Foucault's sociological perspective. Reintegration and crime prevention are objectives pursued by prisons, using work to "discipline" prisoners. The Foucauldian theme on the development of the disciplinary regime (Foucault, Brodeur, Ferri, Amicelle, & Lafleur, 2022), emphasizes the valorisation of work, which allows for a strong control over subjects by anchoring them in places, environments and activities, making them dependent on the performance of tasks according to a certain framework, thus aiming to achieve stabilization.

In terms of the sociology of prisons, prison has long been seen by sociologists as a world of its own, a micro-society within society (Goffman, 1961). The total character of prison institutions evoked by Goffman captures the psychosocial impact that prisoners continue to face because of the strong control exercised over their social, cultural and personal lives within prisons. Although protecting the security of the community, punishing delinquent individuals, educating them and preventing those deviant behaviours are still promoted by the objectives set by the penitentiary institutions (Bony, 2015), also specific to total institutions, the level of authority, the threshold of control exercised over the institutionalized, must be observed.

The treatment of prisoners according to certain standards, the promotion of the institution's total perspective in the staff's relationship with the incarcerated, the formalities highlighted in the standardized daily activities captured in Goffman's research (1961) remain topical in the Romanian prison system.

By targeting the specific interaction of a well-defined social group, using conceptual schemes and analysing its experiences, behaviours and values in combination with external factors that may explain the occurrence of changes, the research derives from the paradigm of symbolic interactionism (Mărginean, 2000). The rehabilitation process to which the prisoners must undergo is followed in the research subject, and in order to be able to see its effects, I focus on their education and involvement in the work during the execution of the sentence.

Among the set of theories that are representative in current research, I have included differential association theory (Sutherland & Cressey, 1966), social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), and the 'new criminology' paradigm (Taylor, Walton, & Yound, 2008).

This article highlights some of the findings from the doctoral research, which focuses on the the process of integration of inmates into the labour market and the employment of former prisoners. The aim of this research is to obtain an overview of the labour involvement of inmates in Oradea Penitentiary and to identify the effects of the collaboration between the penitentiary and the private sector in facilitating employment for incarcerated persons. The fundamental research question: *What are the labour market employment experiences of inmates in Oradea Penitentiary?*

3. Prisoners' right to work

Depending on the type of regime of execution of deprivation of liberty, prisoners may be involved in work, considering their qualifications, state of health, skills, as well as vocational training programs intended for them. According to Law 254/2013, the provision of work by convicted persons may be carried out inside or outside the place of detention, under the regime of "provision of services for individuals or legal entities, on their own account, for activities of a domestic nature necessary for the prison, in case of calamity" (Art. 83 The regime of provision of work (2013)) or in the form of voluntary work.

Learning a trade or professional qualification courses during the period of imprisonment are attested by documents recognized under the law, and it is not specified that the person acquired that qualification as a prisoner, thus avoiding possible labelling.

Prisoners are remunerated for the work performed, except for activities specific to prison management and in the event of disaster. In relation to the work program, the income received by the convicted person for the work performed shall not be less than the minimum gross basic wage regulated at the national level.

Of the income earned by the convicted person, 40 percent goes to the person and 60 percent to the prison administration. During the execution of the sentence, the prisoner can only use 90 percent of this amount, as 10 percent is deposited with the State Treasury and paid to the person only upon release. At the same time, if the prisoner is obliged to pay civil damages, half of the 40 percent will be withheld. In the case of damage to the prison or the point of work, the damage will be recovered by imputation (Law no. 254/2013; Art. Art. 83-88).

4. Research methodology

This research was originally designed as a mixed-methods study where I collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data on the phenomenon of inmates' employment at Oradea Penitentiary, converging the results during interpretation.

The quantitative component involved administering structured questionnaires to 160 prisoners during 2023, representing approximately 27 percent of Oradea Penitentiary's population, with analysis of this data to be published separately. Accordingly, the present article focuses exclusively on the qualitative methodology, specifically, stakeholder perspectives from interviews with penitentiary staff and employers.

This research aims to obtain enlightening conclusions on the way in which the collaboration with private employers is articulated with the chances of insertion in the labour market of prisoners, as well as their motivation to get involved in work activities. Thus, the sociological survey method aimed to collect qualitative information, using the semi-structured interview with key participants identified through purposeful sampling.

The qualitative component employed semi-structured interviews with 11 key stakeholders, nine penitentiary police officers, representing diverse operational and educational roles in Oradea Penitentiary and two local entrepreneurs (Valtryp and Cargus) who have concluded employment contracts with inmates of the penitentiary. Interview scheduling accommodated participant availability, and sessions typically lasted approximately 40 minutes. These interviews were conducted in two distinct phases: penitentiary staff were interviewed during 2023-2024, while entrepreneur interviews took place in 2025. Guided by a semi-structured protocol, the interviews aimed to gather information about the process of selection and involvement of prisoners in work, the challenges reported by staff and entrepreneurs in working with prisoners, as well as the preparation for their reintegration into society. All participants provided informed consent for audio recording, with one exception: an entrepreneur declined audio recording, so for this participant, detailed written notes were taken during the interview.

This investigation focuses on three core research objectives regarding inmate rehabilitation through labour within the Romanian penitentiary system:
- Identifying the level of engagement of incarcerated individuals in work activities and vocational programs during their sentence period.
- Analysing penitentiary staff's perceptions concerning the motivation factors influencing inmates' participation in labour and professional training.
- Examining employer perspectives on collaborative dynamics, operational challenges, and perceived outcomes of hiring incarcerated workers.

This study addresses the following research questions:
1. What motivates inmates to participate in vocational training programs and engage in work activities during their incarceration?
2. To what extent do vocational training courses offered in penitentiaries align with the labour market integration needs of inmates?
3. What interventions do penitentiary institutions implement to prepare inmates for employment and facilitate their integration into work programs?
4. How do entrepreneurs perceive the viability and challenges of inmate labour programs in developing job-ready skills and sustainable collaborations with the penitentiary system?

Data analysis employed rigorous thematic analysis following (Braun & Clarke, 2006) framework. The iterative process began with deep immersion in the transcripts through repeated readings. Initial open coding identified key concepts within the data. These preliminary codes were then refined and consolidated through focused coding, grouping related ideas into potential themes.

This structured approach ensured the analysis remained explicitly focused on the study's objectives regarding stakeholder perspectives and operational dynamics, grounding the findings firmly in the empirical evidence.

5. Predicting ex-prisoner success: key reintegration factors

Professional activity and the existence of a shelter play a decisive role in the success of social reintegration, as well as in the prevention of delinquent behaviour of individuals (Burke, Collett, & McNeill, 2018). Supporting the close correlation between work and the social reintegration of offenders, we aimed to identify whether there is a pattern of ex-prisoners who are more likely to return to the labour market and thus to experience an accelerated process of social reintegration.

Work gives people the opportunity to engage socially, to organize their lives in a functional way, channelling their potential towards a goal, even if implicit servitude often overshadows its usefulness. However, the mere access to a job after release does not automatically imply that the individual has given up the criminal career.

This section briefly summarizes some basic characteristics of prisoners with higher chances of reintegration. Based on several longitudinal studies of the return of ex-offenders from the United States of America (La Vigne, Visher, & Castro, 2004), we have been able to develop a profile of prisoners who are more likely to be successful in the rehabilitation process. Therefore, inmates with higher integration potential upon release are those meeting as many of the following indicators as possible: possession of valid identification absence of drug or alcohol addiction post-release, a limited history of prior convictions, maintained relationships with family members, residence in a safe neighbourhood, and established contacts with employers since leaving prison.

Taking this information into account, I aimed to design data collection instruments to capture these indicators for my chosen sample as well. The reality of prisoners' return to society captures negative experiences in most cases (Graham & McNeill, 2017). High percentages of recidivism rates in Romania are regularly reported in the annual reports of the NAP, thus showing the failure of social reintegration of those who return to prison.

6. Oradea Penitentiary and private sector partnerships

Referring to the official information provided by the penitentiary unit, the interest in the work points carried out during 2022 shows a high level of involvement of inmates in work activities, both inside and outside the penitentiary, managing to rank in the "top 5 units in the country in terms of the degree of use of work, income from services rendered and the percentage of use of paid work" (National Administration of Penitentiaries, 2023). The job offer consisted of 10 workplaces outside the penitentiary and 4 workplaces inside the place of detention, obtained through collaboration contracts with private companies.

Nationally, there has been a consecutive increase in the number of prisoners assigned to work over the last three years. For paid work, in 2022 the average headcount was 1858, with an average of 23114 prisoners in custody, while in 2021 there were 914 out of 22565 existing prisoners, and for 2020 there were only

696 out of 20743 existing prisoners involved. We noted that for serving and volunteering, the number of people involved did not show as significant annual increases as for paid activities (2022 – 4132 prisoners; 2021 – 3970 prisoners; 2020 – 3970 prisoners) (National Administration of Penitentiaries, 2023). The major difference in the three years of remunerated activities can be attributed to the restrictions caused by the pandemic during that period, with prisoners' access to off-site work points being interrupted.

Referring to data from the latest Oradea Penitentiary annual activity report, it emerges that out of the total number of inmates, which is close to 600 people, 26.5 percent were involved in work. Almost half of these persons (52%) were not declared fit for work. In 2024, work assignments included: 45 detainees in facility maintenance, 29 in GAZ (animal husbandry), 12 volunteers, and 257 individuals assigned to service duties.

The Oradea Penitentiary has developed partnerships with private companies in sectors such as automotive, construction, clothing and printing. In 2024, three work points were organized inside the place of detention (Romanbag, Valtryp, R.D. Romania) and six work points outside the penitentiary, three less than in the previous year (Oradea City Hall, Sânmartin City Hall, GAZ, Real Expert, Merotif and Cargus) (Penitentiary Oradea, 2024). In the case of the employer Valtryp, the training and qualification part of the inmates' training and qualification was carried out in their own factory, but the collaboration continued by opening a working point inside the place of detention, thus providing the opportunity for the inmates to be involved in the production of the fledges.

At the national level, the contracts concluded between economic agents and the NAP, involve more than 2000 persons in custody in work every year, some collaborations reaching even more than 10 years of activity, from which it can be deduced that there is a mutual satisfaction as a result of these decisions. The areas of activity are in fields such as: "car wiring, footwear manufacturing, plastics, construction, printing, electrical components assembly" (National Administration of Penitentiaries, 2023).

Empirical findings from structured entrepreneur interviews highlighted the following key aspects: motivation to collaborate with Oradea Penitentiary, integration and adaptation to work of prisoners, challenges of this collaboration, recruitment process of incarcerated people, perception of their own employees towards prisoners brought to work, productivity evaluation and post-release employment.

7. Employers' perspective

By analysing the perspective of the employers who have contracted with Oradea Prison to use prisoners in the workplace, I have obtained aspects that highlight both the benefits and the challenges that they face because of these collaborations. In the case of those who have accepted that prisoners work outside the place of detention, it is relevant to examine the existence of a diversity in the labour field, where teams of workers existing in the companies have the

opportunity to work alongside those with justice-involved individuals. This context suggests employers may anticipate workforce reluctance, apprehension, or refusal to co-working with incarcerated persons.

Their readiness to facilitate the social integration of convicted offenders also presupposes preparation of the working environment into which they are brought. In discussions with entrepreneurs, the need for training for their own employees was emphasized, with a view to ensuring a non-judgmental attitude in dealing with prisoners.

Once the adjustment period is over, the discipline, the quality of the work performed and the reliability they show at the external work points, the convicted persons are praised both by the contractors and the employees:

> "Even the team leaders tell me that we couldn't work without them. ... we have had cases when they were sorry to see them go, they missed them, I mean they had someone to work with... and they had no relations so to speak other than strictly working, but they were happy that the man who is there arranges the parcels or scans them and it is very important that they were with them." (Entrepreneur 1)

This collaboration of the penitentiary with the private sector is also felt from the economic point of view, Oradea Penitentiary attracting annual revenues that easily exceed the amount of 2.700.000 RON. In this way it manages to cover the administration costs related to the detention space. At the same time, employers appreciate the constant benefit of labour force:

> "It is a start for someone who has no qualifications, and if in the winter season I have people to work here, as soon as spring starts and I can go to work during the day, I run out of people, but thanks to the contract with the penitentiary I can rest assured that I always have people with whom I can do my job (...) they do not take vacation, they do not miss because their child got sick or they have to go somewhere." (Entrepreneur 2)

As for the quality of the work done by the prisoners, the employers first provide them with training, where each stage of the production process is taught and then assign each worker tasks according to their abilities. One aspect they mentioned from this experience is that many of the prisoners who have had to serve long sentences have difficulties working with technology:

> "After 15-20 years of being locked up, when they get here they are surprised how much they have changed, how the phones look... or how we use scanners for the merchandise and... if they don't even have any schooling, you realize we can't use them for scanning, but we put them to sorting or moving the merchandise." (Entrepreneur 2)

Another important aspect of the relationship that prisoners manage to establish with their employers is the fact that once released, they can continue to return to work for them. However, according to the interviewed entrepreneurs, the

number of those who return to work is insignificant, the main reason being geography, once released, they return to the counties where they have family or choose to leave the country to get better wages, and for those with other qualifications, they choose areas where they can earn more money.

The entrepreneurs made a few recommendations on these collaborations. The main aspect they support - which could attract more entrepreneurs willing to offer work to people in detention and especially after their release, would be the implementation of tax breaks such as tax exemptions at national level. It would also stimulate collaborations and possible compensation for taking the risk of bringing people with criminal records into the company.

Another recommendation is to create recruitment programs during the execution of sentences, allowing prisoners to meet potential employers, thereby facilitating a smoother transition to the labour market and increasing the possibility of graduating from vocational training courses related to their fields of interest.

8. Prisoners' motivation to work

Employees interviewed claim that prisoners' expressed desire to work primarily reflects their need to acquire sources of income with which they can support themselves in prison. There are also cases where prisoners accumulate money to send to their families, without waiting for material help from them.

Another motivation identified by the employees among the inmates is their increased interest in external work points, where the key benefit mentioned is the access to people outside the prison environment, which has a positive impact on the inmates:

> "It changes their mood too, they are much more relaxed, they try to have the most exemplary behavior to get outside the prison again... it is a relief from the punishment for them." (police-operative officer A.V.)

Work becomes a refuge for some prisoners, a way to occupy their time and distract them from their surroundings, as well as the days they have earned through work.

The above-mentioned arguments regarding the motivation of prisoners to engage in work can be easily deduced even by people outside the prison environment and are also mentioned by prisoners when filling in the questionnaire or in various media reports. However, there are aspects which they are reluctant to acknowledge, and which are mostly only noticed by prison staff who are involved in direct work with prisoners. As prisoners spend a lot of time in their rooms, the way they occupy their free time is limited to certain practices they were used to before they were sentenced. Whether watching TV, reading, exercising, cooking by improvised means, they also gamble, which often generates debts or "obligations". Thus, they become compelled to create new sources of income and show interest in getting involved in work:

"(...) they want to get involved in paid work and if they have debts to other prisoners, created by gambling or other debts to other more wealthy prisoners who have at some point done them some unorthodox services, so to speak." (police-operative officer L.S.)

9. Post-release difficulties

Returning to prison is one of the most difficult stages for a person who has just served their sentence. The longer the period of incarceration, the more challenging and difficult it can be to return to society:

"The longer a prisoner stays in the prison environment, the more his attitude towards society changes and the more the shock for him is quite increased. He finds a different infrastructure after 10 years, he finds different money... the people he knew in the past are not the same, maybe some relationships have cooled down, or maybe he had some reticence about his family and he avoided them in order not to be criticized, judged." (police officer-education officer C.I.).

The staff mentions the importance of rebuilding relations with the family, "a lot of them wanted to stay with their families, they have been saying that since their time in prison" (police officer-operative officer A.V.), then finding a job.

Another important observation related to facilitating the reintegration of former prisoners into the labour market is found in those who, during their detention, managed to get a job outside the detention point and gain the attention of the beneficiary in a positive manner:

"Many of them managed to work in those companies where they also worked during their incarceration. They showed exemplary behaviour, interest in work and were appreciated. They were given a contract even after that period of work in the prison environment." (police operative L.P)

The challenges that most prisoners associate with finding a job once they are released relate to having a criminal record and the negative labelling that society attaches to them (Durnescu, 2017).

The experience that prisoners reported in obtaining employment between their convictions ranged from a few days to two months, and the fields in which they found work were mostly construction and services (plumber, carpenter, electrician, etc.). In order to facilitate their return to freedom, ex-prisoners need first and foremost the support of a support group. Family and friends play a very important role in their return to freedom, as they are among those to whom prisoners turn for help in finding a job and shelter.

10. Discussion

This study reports on the effects of work programmes in Oradea Penitentiary, where public-private partnerships play a facilitating role, discipline is imposed through the prism of work involvement (Foucault, Brodeur, Ferri,

Amicelle, & Lafleur, 2022), but at the same time the connection between reintegration and the detainees is strengthened. The data obtained corroborates Goffman's theory of total institutions (1961) in which work reconnects prisoners with the external social environment and breaks institutional isolation. However, the duality of labour as both a rehabilitative tool and an extension of prison control continues.

Collaborations between prisons and the private sector bring benefits for all parties involved: access to stable labour force, seriousness of the work involved, generation of income for the penitentiary units (over 2.7 million RON annually at Oradea Penitentiary). However, as the interviewed contractors pointed out, once released, people do not continue the co-operation started during their sentence due to structural barriers: geographical relocation, wage competition. These findings align with Durnescu's (2017) Five Stages of Reintegration, in which accessing a job and housing after release are essential but often inaccessible without systemic support.

Employers are still reluctant to hire ex-prisoners, with the former prisoner's professional experience being more important than the latter's professional experience, even though employers already working with prisons praise the productivity and discipline of those they have had in their employ. Tax incentives could mitigate this by encouraging entrepreneurs to hire people with criminal records.

In addition to this, signalling the importance of family support and making commitments such as recruitment programmes would operationalise Hirschi's social control theory, where ties to society are strengthened (Burke, Collett, & McNeill, 2018).

I emphasise that prison work should go beyond disciplinary functions such as control, obedience, routinisation, aspects that are traditionally associated with prison activities, to promote identity reconstruction. For all this to materialise, institutional coordination is necessary to transform generally isolated partnerships into a cohesive reintegration ecosystem.

11. Conclusion

Work plays a key role in the reintegration of ex-prisoners, reducing recidivism and promoting social inclusion. By strengthening partnerships between correctional institutions and the private sector, rehabilitation opportunities can be created, and thus inclusive communities can be achieved for existing vulnerable groups.

By analysing the research data, the importance of work in the social reintegration of offenders is highlighted. Existing legislation does indeed support work activities while serving a sentence, but the success of these initiatives depends on the existence of partnerships between the private sector and prison establishments.

Involving detainees in work generates more than just a source of income and a positive occupation of time. The important aspects involve an assumption of

responsibility, satisfaction, increased self-esteem and their need to have contact with social reality, together they can form a framework conducive to preparation for life after release.

Collaboration between prisons and the private sector is proving to be beneficial for prisoners, while for detention facilities it can mean an important source of income and for employers, a stable and committed workforce.

However, social reintegration through work is not a guaranteed success, as it is a complex process that encounters negative aspects such as social stigmatization, lack of support group relations or homelessness. Family or social network support, maintaining links with employers encountered in detention and employment can be important factors contributing to desistance.

In conclusion, we must look at the phenomenon of social reintegration of ex-prisoners from a perspective with inter-institutional contributions, where involvement in work is not just a form of discipline, but rather a tool for the transformation of the individual.

The promotion and development of partnerships entered by prisons with representatives of the economic environment, together with support for the employment of ex-prisoners through public policies, are a way of moving towards an inclusive society.

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INTERSECTING VULNERABILITIES: BUCHAREST HOUSING AT THE NEXUS OF SEISMIC EXPOSURE, SOCIAL PRECARITY AND CULTURAL PERCEPTION OF RISK

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Abstract: The topic of earthquakes is not just about buildings; it also concerns the people who live in them. When we refer to earthquakes, we are not merely referring to buildings – we are talking about the people who live in them. Earthquakes do not affect everyone equally, even when we inhabit equally unsafe structures. In today's urban context, seismic risk cannot be reduced to technical aspects, just as vulnerability can no longer be understood solely as exposure to natural hazards. Seismic risk involves the interaction of structural, political, social, economic, and cultural factors. This article focuses on Bucharest – the European capital with the highest seismic risk (Armaş et al., 2017; Crowley et al., 2021) – marked by a long seismic history and fragile residential infrastructure. Based on qualitative research, including 32 in-depth interviews conducted between March 2022 and September 2024 with tenants and owners of high-risk buildings in Bucharest, each lasting between 1h30m and 3h, this study highlights how structural and social vulnerabilities intersect and amplify one another. It further explores symbolic representations and myths embedded in the collective memory of past seismic events. The paper reconceptualizes housing as a space of internalized danger and addresses seismic risk not as an isolated threat, but as a socially and culturally embedded reality. It concludes by underlining the need for an interdisciplinary mapping of vulnerabilities and urban policies centred on community resilience and local perceptions of risk.

Keywords: vulnerable city, structural vulnerability, seismic risk, social precarity, housing, risk perception, collective memory, community resilience.

Résumé : Le sujet des tremblements de terre ne concerne pas seulement les bâtiments ; il concerne aussi les personnes qui y vivent. Le séisme ne nous affecte pas tous de manière égale, même si nous habitons des structures également vulnérables. Dans le contexte urbain actuel, le risque sismique ne peut plus être réduit à ses aspects techniques, tout comme la vulnérabilité ne peut plus être comprise uniquement comme une exposition aux aléas naturels. Le risque sismique implique l'interaction de facteurs structurels, politiques, sociaux, économiques et culturels. Cet article analyse le cas de Bucarest – capitale européenne avec le plus haut degré de risque sismique (Armaş et al., 2017 ; Crowley et al., 2021) – marquée par une histoire sismique profonde et une infrastructure résidentielle

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fragile. S'appuyant sur une recherche qualitative comprenant 32 entretiens approfondis réalisés entre mars 2022 et septembre 2024 auprès de locataires et de propriétaires d'immeubles à risque à Bucarest, cette étude met en lumière la manière dont les vulnérabilités structurelles et sociales se croisent et se renforcent mutuellement. Elle explore également les mécanismes de gestion du risque, les symboles et les mythes ancrés dans la mémoire collective du tremblement de terre. Le travail propose une relecture de l'habitat comme espace du danger intériorisé et envisage le risque sismique non comme une menace isolée, mais comme une réalité sociale et culturelle intégrée. La conclusion souligne la nécessité d'une cartographie interdisciplinaire des vulnérabilités et de politiques urbaines centrées sur la résilience communautaire, intégrant aussi la dimension culturelle de la perception du risque par les habitants.

Mots-clés : ville vulnérable, vulnérabilité structurelle, risque sismique, précarité sociale, habitat, perception du risque, mémoire collective, résilience communautaire.

Rezumat: Tematica cutremurelor nu este doar despre clădiri; îi vizează și pe oamenii care locuiesc în ele. Cutremurul nu ne afectează în mod egal, deși locuim în structuri nesigure la cutremure. În contextul urban actual, riscul seismic nu mai poate fi redus la aspecte tehnice, cum nici vulnerabilitatea nu mai poate fi înțeleasă doar ca expunere la hazarduri naturale. Riscul seismic implică interacțiunea dintre factori structurali, politici, sociali, economici și culturali, iar acest articol analizează cazul Bucureștiului, capitală cu cel mai înalt grad de risc seismic din Europa, marcat de o istorie seismică profundă și de o infrastructură rezidențială fragilă (Armaş et al., 2017; Crowley et al., 2021). Pornind de la un demers de cercetare calitativ, care a inclus 32 de interviuri în profunzime realizate între Martie 2022 și Septembrie 2024 cu chiriași și proprietari ai imobilelor cu risc seismic, articolul evidențiază atât modul în care vulnerabilitățile structurale și sociale se intersectează și se amplifică reciproc, cât și mecanismele de gestionare a riscului, simbolurile și miturile care sunt ancorate în memoria colectivă a cutremurului. Lucrarea propune o reconceptualizare a locuirii ca spațiu al pericolului internalizat și analizează riscul seismic nu ca element distinct, ci înglobat în simboluri, precaritate, (in)acțiune instituțională și inechitate socială care contribuie la menținerea unui status quo vulnerabil. Concluzia subliniază necesitatea unei cartografieri interdisciplinare a vulnerabilităților și a unor politici urbane centrate pe reziliența comunitară în fața unui hazard, integrând și dimensiunea culturală a percepției riscului de către locuitori.

Cuvinte cheie: oraș vulnerabil, vulnerabilitate structurală, risc seismic, precaritate socială, locuire, percepția riscului, memorie colectivă, reziliență comunitară.

1. Introduction: A *Fragile* Bucharest

Contemporary cities are spaces of paradox – marked by accelerated development and technological progress, yet also by deep fragility. Bucharest, facing one of the highest seismic risks in Europe, stands not only as the European capital most exposed to earthquakes but also among the continent's five most vulnerable cities (Armaş et al., 2017; Crowley et al., 2021). This reality is rooted not only in natural factors (such as the proximity to the Vrancea seismic zone) but also layered in socio-urban dynamics. Within this landscape, Bucharest emerges as a paradigmatic case of intersecting vulnerabilities – biophysical, social, and structural – that converge most acutely in the city's historic core, where seismic

history, cultural heritage, precarious housing, and urban inequalities coexist. Earthquakes, as recurrent and devastating hazards, shape not only the physical landscape but also the contours of urban vulnerability, disproportionately affecting those who are structurally and socially fragile. In Bucharest, vulnerability is not merely about unsafe buildings, it is about the lives precariously sheltered within them. Here, the overlapping of structural fragility and social instability transforms housing into more than a basic need – it becomes a contested space of insecurity, negotiation, and quiet, persistent anxiety.

Starting from the fact that over 2,500 buildings in Bucharest are classified in seismic risk categories, this research aims to explore how structural vulnerability is mirrored in social vulnerability and how individual experiences and collective perceptions shape the relationship to risk. Earthquakes do not affect us equally. We are not equally exposed to seismic risk, nor do we have access to the same resources to be resilient in the face of disaster. For this reason, as I will argue throughout this paper, seismic risk must be approached not solely as a geophysical phenomenon but as a profoundly social issue that must be understood in a broader context. Earthquakes are not just about buildings – they are about the people who inhabit them and the danger they live with. Housing precarity and the poor quality of dwellings in Romania – and particularly in Bucharest – add an additional layer of vulnerability for those exposed to seismic risk. More than one-third of homes are in a state of disrepair, suffering from structural deterioration, poor insulation, limited access to energy, and minimal earthquake protection, largely due to unaffordable repair costs or a lack of perceived necessity (Văcăreanu et al., 2019; Moldovan, 2018; Armaş, 2012).

Bucharest can thus be described as a "fragile city" – not only through the visible decay of its infrastructure but through the broader failure to institutionalize a culture of risk awareness and preparedness. The term *fragile* is used here to emphasize the multiple intersecting vulnerabilities, from social inequality, infrastructural fragility, and limited intervention capacity of the state to low public risk awareness and poor preparedness. This article therefore focuses on urban vulnerability to seismic risk, with particular emphasis on the lived experience of housing insecurity in Bucharest.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this study, vulnerability is understood as the result of a complex interplay between physical exposure to risk, economic precarity, lack of access to resources, social exclusion, and pervasive distrust in the state's capacity to manage seismic threats. Likewise, seismic risk cannot be reduced to a mere probabilistic calculation or engineering assessment. Risk is socially constructed, politically negotiated, and culturally reconfigured within spaces that individuals call (a)home. As Cutter (1996) emphasizes, vulnerability stems from both hazard exposure and adaptive capacity, reflecting the intersection of structural (biophysical) and social conditions. In this sense, Cutter (2003, pp. 1-2) introduces the notion of a "science of vulnerability," one that merges engineering data about infrastructure with social

indicators such as social capital and institutional support. This approach seeks not only to measure risk but also to map the structural inequalities that amplify the effects of hazards. Beck (2009) refers to this emerging field as a "reflexive science," oriented toward anticipating and managing vulnerability in its dynamic manifestations.

In the urban context of Bucharest, integrating such an interdisciplinary framework is crucial for understanding seismic risk and for building a truly resilient city. Despite the existence of official lists identifying structurally vulnerable buildings, many territorial vulnerabilities and fragile structures remain unmapped, contributing to a systemic underestimation or outright minimization of risk at the institutional level. Reducing casualties and material damage thus depends on the comprehensive recognition and mapping of all forms of vulnerability present in the capital – before a new hazard transforms fragilities into catastrophe.

Mapping Urban Vulnerabilities

The paradigm shifts from "hazard" to "vulnerability," proposed by Gaillard and Mercer (2013) and Donovan (2016), highlights that disasters are not merely the result of extreme natural events, but of pre-existing, deeply rooted social vulnerabilities and uneven resource distributions. Along these lines, Cannon (1994, pp. 19-20) proposes an analytical typology based on five interconnected dimensions: political and infrastructural context, housing conditions, economic capacity, community security, and social structure. Similarly, Granger (2000) develops a model of vulnerability indicators—both physical and social—designed to enhance disaster management and emergency response by prioritizing accessible, actionable data. The failure to integrate these dimensions into prevention policies only exacerbates the impact of hazards and complicates recovery efforts (Cannon, 1994, p. 13).

In Bucharest, recent studies outline a fragmented but alarming portrait of seismic risk exposure (e.g., Armaş et al., 2017a; Armaş et al., 2017b; Toma-Dănilă, 2018; Văcăreanu et al., 2018; Calotescu et al., 2018; Crowley et al., 2021; Pavel et al., 2021). A fragile residential infrastructure, coupled with a densely populated urban core, exacerbates a chronic and systematically ignored vulnerability. In this context, Collier and Lakoff (2008, pp. 8-9) advocate for concepts like "emergency federalism" and "mapping vulnerabilities," emphasizing that disaster preparedness must be distributed across state institutions, communities, and individuals alike. Mapping vulnerabilities thus entails identifying not only areas of physical risk but also social and institutional fragilities, constructing a complex interpretive model of the urban fabric. Today, Bucharest continues to suffer from an incoherent system for structural assessments, incomplete risk data, and a broader absence of a risk anticipation culture. Although hazard modelling has improved, vulnerability remains difficult to quantify officially. Many fragile buildings are missing from public registers, and the lack of targeted public awareness campaigns and data-driven urban planning only amplifies the latent risk.

Urban vulnerability in Bucharest, therefore, has a dual dimension: a visible one – manifested in the red-bulleted buildings and decaying infrastructure – and an invisible one – reflected in institutional neglect, incomplete assessments, and pervasive social precarity. A truly effective mapping of vulnerability must integrate physical, social, and symbolic dimensions to reimagine a safer and more equitable urban environment in the face of seismic threats.

Vulnerability and Seismic Risk

Today, vulnerability stands as a central concept not only in the specialized literature but also in public discourse. Broadly, it denotes a condition of susceptibility to harm, shaped by exposure to environmental or social stressors and constrained adaptive capacity (Adger, 2006). Over time, vulnerability frameworks have evolved from a singular focus on natural hazards toward an appreciation of the critical role of social, political, and cultural factors (Cutter et al., 2003). Thus, vulnerability is increasingly conceptualized as the product of the interaction between hazard exposure and the capacity to anticipate, withstand, and recover from disruptive events (Dwyer, 2004; Blaikie et al., 1994).

In Bucharest, vulnerability manifests at the intersection of structural frailty and deep socio-territorial inequalities (Popescu, 2017). Effective vulnerability assessment must address not only physical risk (biophysical vulnerability) but also institutional capacity, access to resources, and the presence of social solidarity networks. Aging buildings and fragile administrative systems compound this vulnerability, exposing the city to cascading risks. For instance, in a post-earthquake scenario, the inability of hospitals to absorb patient overflow – due to both structural damage and resource scarcity – would illustrate a critical convergence of territorial and social vulnerability.

The literature also highlights the disjunction between technical risk assessments and popular risk perceptions. As Cutter (2003, p. 2) notes, the gap between "expert judgments" and "lay judgments" critically affects decision-making around consolidation and relocation. While engineers may identify clear structural risks, residents often respond based on personal memories, emotions, and local narratives. Slovic's (1987, 1992, 2002) theories on the "availability heuristic" and the "affect heuristic" further explain the human tendency to underestimate unseen or recent hazards and to react emotionally to abstract threats. In Bucharest, the absence of a major recent earthquake fosters a "cognitive de-escalation" of risk, wherein old buildings that have "survived two earthquakes" become perceived symbols of stability – even when technical reports categorize them as dangerous. This dynamic contributes to a collective "cosmeticization" of risk, from which some urban actors' benefit, while others pay the ultimate price.

Building on this line of interpretation, Douglas and Wildavsky's (1982) cultural theory of risk provides an important framework for understanding divergent attitudes toward seismic danger. Hierarchical individuals trust authorities; egalitarians emphasize community solidarity; individualists downplay risks in pursuit of personal advantage; and fatalists resign themselves to hazard as

unavoidable fate. These typologies align closely with the diverse housing strategies and risk adaptations observed in Bucharest – from resistance to structural retrofitting to acceptance of seismic risk in exchange for affordable central housing.

Seismic risk, then, is not simply a matter of structural physics – it is a deeply social and cultural phenomenon, shaped by perceptions, narratives, and political decisions. As Wisner (2005) and Birkmann (2006) argue, vulnerability must be understood not just as a natural hazard outcome, but as a reflection of entrenched social inequalities and unequal access to protection and resources. While existing, models offer valuable frameworks for analysing vulnerability, they often overlook the subjective, experiential dimensions of risk: the ways in which individuals live, internalize, and negotiate danger. For this reason, I propose a conceptual model – the CERC Framework (Calculation, Experience, Recognition, and Consciousness) – to offer a more nuanced understanding of seismic vulnerability and the persistent failures of risk management in Bucharest.

3. Methodology

Departing from the predominantly quantitative approaches that have characterized much of the seismic risk research in Romania (Armaş, 2006, 2017; Văcăreanu et al., 2019), this study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic, and interpretative framework. I am interested not solely in why seismic risk persists despite its technical documentation, but in how it is lived, internalized, negotiated, and sometimes normalized by those who inhabit vulnerable spaces. Risk, in this sense, is not just a statistical probability – it is a lived and culturally mediated experience. To explore this, I employed sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015), which foregrounds the role of sensory perceptions and affective engagements in shaping everyday spatial practices. Seismic risk is thus approached not only as a technical and physical phenomenon, but as a complex socio-cultural reality, constituted through memory, affect, narratives, and ambivalent relationships with institutional structures. At the core of this investigation lies an inquiry into the intersection between structural vulnerability and social precarity – a convergence that manifests in the everyday lives of residents inhabiting buildings officially classified as seismically at-risk. The research seeks to conceptualize this dynamic as a form of intersecting vulnerability, wherein physical exposure to hazard interacts with dimensions of economic instability, governance failure, and symbolic framings of danger.

This inquiry was guided by a set of objectives aimed at capturing the lived dimension of seismic risk in Bucharest. Specifically, I sought to explore how seismic risk is perceived, negotiated, or denied by residents of structurally vulnerable buildings; to identify social categories of vulnerability and the cultural representations that shape attitudes towards seismic danger; and to analyze how narratives, myths, and sensory experiences contribute to the symbolic rationalization and normalization of risk. These goals were further refined into two primary research questions: a) How do residents of structurally unsafe buildings

understand and internalize seismic risk in their everyday lives? and b) What are the socio-cultural and affective mechanisms through which vulnerability is rationalized, resisted, or reinterpreted?

The fieldwork consisted of 32 in-depth interviews conducted between March 2022 and September 2024 with residents of Bucharest's high-risk buildings, all constructed prior to 1977 and officially classified as seismically vulnerable. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, allowing for the inclusion of both owners and tenants across a diverse socio-demographic spectrum: young professionals, artists, students, elderly individuals, and low-income residents. Each interview lasted between 1 hour and 30 minutes and 3 hours, enabling the collection of rich, nuanced narratives. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Data analysis was conducted between October 2024 and February 2025 through iterative readings and thematic organization, following an interpretive qualitative approach.

The approach combined semi-structured and unstructured interview formats (Jupp, 2010; Rotariu & Iluţ, 2001), and the interview guide included prompts on seismic risk perception, affective and material relationships with one's home and neighborhood, access to structural information, and interactions with local authorities. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of those who live with risk, this research moves beyond abstract assessments and engages with the textured, embodied realities through which seismic vulnerability is both produced and endured.

In addition, the research incorporated an analysis of digital discourses – from Facebook groups to real estate advertisements – collected between October 2021 and the end of 2024, where public narratives around risk, cracks, and consolidation were actively constructed and debated. The methodological emphasis was not on statistical representativeness, but on capturing the embodied, affective, and symbolic experiences through which seismic vulnerability is understood and lived.

4. Social Typologies and Cultural Representations of Vulnerability and Seismic Risk

Through this ethnographic research, I have identified a series of key findings regarding seismic risk and its (often difficult) management, which I will present in this section – from the intersection of social vulnerabilities and the rationalization and *cosmeticization of risk*, to the cultural meanings attached to these experiences.

a) Vulnerable Categories

In the analysis of urban seismic risk, a crucial dimension lies in identifying and understanding the social groups most exposed to hazard. In Bucharest, vulnerability is not evenly distributed but stratified, reflecting the social, economic, and cultural tensions that structure the contemporary city and its relationship to seismic risk. Based on interviews conducted with residents of buildings officially

classified at seismic risk, I identified four categories of vulnerable inhabitants. Each of these categories is characterized by a specific type of exposure and a distinct way of managing – or denying – the seismic threat. Owners, tenants, the elderly, and marginalized groups are not only affected by the hazard, but they also actively and passively shape the city's and institutions' approaches to risk management.

Owners

A primary social category relevant to urban vulnerability is that of property owners. Often perceived as powerful actors in the urban space – benefiting from decision-making power and resource access – their attitude toward seismic risk is marked by ambivalence and mistrust. Many tend to minimize the danger, invoking the age of the building and its survival through previous earthquakes, fostering a non-engagement attitude where structural strengthening is not seen as an immediate priority. Mistrust in state institutions, suspicion about the quality of public consolidation works, excessive bureaucracy, high costs, and lack of transparency fuel a deep reluctance toward any structural intervention. This stance can be interpreted through the lens of the "affective heuristic" described by Slovic et al. (2002), where risk is processed emotionally and anchored in personal experiences rather than in objective evaluations, with past experiences dominating future expectations.

An important distinction must be made between two subcategories of owners: *a)* those who live in the vulnerable buildings themselves, directly assuming the risk, and *b)* absentee owners who shift the risk onto others, especially tenants. The latter economically exploit their properties – through rental or sale – without being directly exposed to seismic risk. Thus, owners become not only beneficiaries of precarious housing conditions but also vectors of a systematic transfer of risk onto more vulnerable social groups.

Tenants

A second vulnerable group comprises tenants. Unlike owners, tenants experience a distinct form of vulnerability, indirect but with potentially more severe consequences. Although many tenants are not socio-economically vulnerable in the traditional sense – having access to information, resources, and social or economic capital – they are profoundly vulnerable in terms of decision-making power. Without the authority to initiate consolidation or even minor structural interventions – which always require owners' consent – tenants are "constrained" to accept seismic risk as an intrinsic part of urban living. I use "constrained" in quotation marks because this acceptance is often a conscious and negotiated decision rather than a passive one.

Living in a structurally vulnerable building reflects an ongoing calculated negotiation between perceived risks and immediate benefits. Many interviewees described it vividly: *"I'm paying 350 euros, and look at this space – four rooms, maybe five if you count the hallway – for the price of two in one of those cramped communist blocks"* (S1, 31, musician and professor) or *"I really scored with this place. Of course,*

because of the risk, the rent was lower than the market price […] If they reinforce the building, I wouldn't be able to afford to live here anymore" (S2, 27, film director). In other words, tenants are willing to accept a high seismic risk in exchange for a low rent. The *benefit* of accessing a central location – close to work, cultural venues, or social networks – often outweighs the *cost* of the seismic risk, which is often perceived as abstract or remote. In addition to these practical benefits, central-city living also carries symbolic value, especially if we understand housing as a form of social distinction in Bourdieu's terms (1984). As many respondents emphasized, older interwar buildings, even if labelled as seismically risky or marked with the "red dot," are seen as prestigious, aesthetically and culturally superior to communist-era or newer buildings, which are perceived as impersonal. Features such as solid wood flooring, stained glass doors, mosaic tiles, and high ceilings are perceived as signs of cultural or symbolic capital, associated with a bohemian or bourgeois lifestyle. Thus, this choice reflects a "risk-benefit trade-off," illustrating how social vulnerability is shaped by everyday pragmatic and economic priorities (Adger, 2006).

At the same time, as many tenants pointed out, *"Why would the owner be interested in seismic retrofitting if he's not even living here and the rent money keeps coming in anyway?"* (S1, 31, musician and professor). They are also fully aware that if the building were to be reinforced, the rent would likely increase, making it unaffordable for them – thus adding another reason to accept the compromise. This dynamic reflects what may be described as a form of accepted vulnerability, which aligns with the cultural theory of risk proposed by Douglas and Wildavsky (1982). According to their framework, some groups come to normalize danger as an inherent part of their environment, shaped by societal perceptions of risk. In this light, tenant vulnerability is not only a structural constraint but also the outcome of a cultural and social process of internalizing risk, within a fragmented urban landscape marked by housing inequality and intense competition for well-located homes.

The Elderly

The elderly, a major segment among residents of vulnerable buildings, represent a double fragility: biological and social. Many minimize seismic risk, perceiving earthquakes more as abstract uncertainties than imminent dangers. Having survived previous earthquakes – especially the major events of 1940 and 1977 – many consider their buildings to be inherently safe. However, this belief is misleading, with each tremor, however minor, structural integrity deteriorates, particularly without interventions for reinforcement. This phenomenon resembles a cardiac analogy – surviving repeated heart attacks does not guarantee survival of the next, rather, it increases vulnerability with each occurrence. Similarly, building resilience diminishes progressively without maintenance or consolidation.

The elderly's emotional attachment to their homes, seen as personal and familial anchors, further intensifies their reluctance to relocate or accept

interventions. As one respondent lamented: *"In the corner, there's a tenant actor I hardly ever see, the neighbour next to me is wild, the one across is old, and the rest... I don't even know them. Tenants come and go... how could you form any real connection?"* (S3, 78, retired) Even though the social cohesion that once characterized these spaces has eroded, the emotional attachment to both the apartment and the building remains a vital source of identity and memory. Many residents view the official classification of their buildings under seismic risk category I (commonly marked with a "red dot") not as an objective threat, but as an exaggeration or even as the result of speculative real estate interests. This scepticism is reinforced by the everyday reality that these buildings are still inhabited, often by younger tenants, and continue to function as vibrant urban spaces. The very fact that life goes on within them undermines the narrative of imminent collapse. Refusal to temporarily relocate for seismic retrofitting is shaped not only by limited financial means but also by a profound cultural resistance to dislocation. In this context, social vulnerability overlaps with physical fragility, and economic precarity further constrains any capacity to adapt or respond proactively to seismic risk.

Marginalized Groups

Undoubtedly, the most exposed category is that of marginalized groups. Communities living informally – in retroceded or highly deteriorated buildings – face a cumulative convergence of risks. Precarious housing, extreme poverty, lack of healthcare or education access, exclusion from information networks, and absence of social protection compound their vulnerability. As Wisner et al. (2005) and Birkmann (2006) highlight, these groups experience a "structural vulnerability process" where natural hazards impact an already fragile social terrain. Structural vulnerability (poor housing conditions) is thus magnified by social vulnerability (poverty, exclusion), making seismic events disproportionately devastating for these communities. These dynamics expose not only pre-existing inequalities but also the way Bucharest's urban system externalizes seismic risk. Housing precariousness and resource scarcity are interdependent phenomena, jointly shaping the city's seismic vulnerability profile.

Importantly, these four groups are not isolated; they are interconnected through complex processes of risk transfer. Owners refusing consolidation pass the risk onto tenants, tenants internalize it as part of urban life, the elderly reinforce collective fragility by rejecting relocation, and marginalized groups bear the compounded consequences. Thus, understanding these vulnerable categories is not merely descriptive – it is essential for crafting effective, socially just, and culturally sensitive public policies. Recognizing intersecting vulnerabilities and the subtle mechanisms of risk transfer constitutes the first step toward a seismic risk governance model that is both technically effective and socially equitable. As Blaikie et al. (1994) and Cannon (1994) remind us, disasters are not natural – they are socially constructed through pre-existing inequalities. Housing, paradoxically, becomes simultaneously refuge and risk.

b) Humour as a Coping Mechanism in the Face of Risk

Another crucial element in explaining how seismic risk is internalized into everyday life is what I have termed "humour as a coping mechanism in the face of risk." This approach reflects a form of psychological adaptation to seismic vulnerability. Faced with an abstract and difficult-to-conceptualize threat – such as a major earthquake – residents interviewed for this research transform anxiety into humour, reducing cognitive tension and facilitating the integration of risk into an acceptable life narrative. This strategy is consistent with what Paul Slovic (2002) described as the affect heuristic – the process through which emotions, rather than rational analyses, guide responses to threats.

Instead of undertaking concrete measures such as consolidation or relocation, individuals create their own emotional and symbolic frameworks within which risk is minimized – or even ridiculed. Expressions like *"We might die, but at least we'll die in luxury"* (S4, 26, UNATC student), *"Even if it collapses, at least I lived in the centre"* (S5, 25, student), *"You go up in the lift and come down by the floor"* (S6, 47, medical researcher), or *"I'd rather collapse at University Square (city centre) than in Asmita Gardens², though I still think this block will hold"* (S7, 27, photographer), are eloquent examples of how imminent danger is absorbed into everyday culture through defensive humour. This logic is further reinforced by a widespread distrust of new buildings, as one respondent noted *"New buildings are cancer on earth"* (S2, 28, film director). There is thus a visible rejection of new developments and an emotional attachment to older buildings despite their seismic vulnerability. These attitudes are also shaped by real estate discourses that idealize life in historical buildings, transforming housing from a practical matter into a marker of lifestyle and symbolic capital: *"Living here is like being in a toxic relationship – you know it's bad for you, but you still cling to it for all the wrong reasons"* (S8, 36, software developer).

Thus, humour becomes both a mechanism for normalizing risk and a collective cultural strategy of survival in a city permanently exposed to seismic hazards. Where institutional protection is weak or perceived as ineffective, individuals develop their own methods for managing uncertainty – humour, normalization, and denial among them.

c) The *Cosmeticization* of Seismic Risk

Symbolic rationalizations, urban myths, and public narratives play a key role in perpetuating seismic vulnerability and obscuring its dangers. Across interviews with residents, real estate marketing, YouTube videos, social media discourses, and housing advertisements, I identified a striking pattern of risk *cosmeticization*: the active rebranding of seismic danger into desirable urban qualities. Phrases like *"bohemian apartment with a view over Cişmigiu Park"*,

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²A recently constructed residential complex, widely regarded as controversial due to perceived structural vulnerabilities and a heightened risk of collapse during a major earthquake – attributed not solely to the building's design or materials, but to the geotechnical instability of the terrain on which it was erected.

"stunning terrace overlooking the Old Town", *"historic charm apartment"*, *"building has no seismic risk, only Urgency Class 2³ (U2)"* or *"spacious interwar apartment, ultra central, no seismic risk"* are common refrains. Among these, the phrase *"no seismic risk"* is particularly deceptive. Rather than indicating a building that has been assessed and found safe, *"no seismic risk"* often means that the building has never undergone seismic evaluation. In other words, ignorance is sold as security. Similarly, Urgency Class (U1, U2, U3) categories are often misrepresented. Many residents assume that a building in U2 is safer than one classified at seismic risk, when in fact all emergency classes today correspond to Risk Class I – the infamous "red dot" (*bulină roșie*). As Bianca (S9, student) candidly explained: *"When I moved to Bucharest, I had a few options. I chose this apartment because it only had U2, and I thought, 'at least it's not high risk"*. Such testimonies reveal how pseudo-technical explanations – often spread by real estate agents and developers – shape residents' perceptions and lead them into making poorly informed decisions. They offer a false sense of security and perpetuate residence in unsafe buildings motivated by price, location, or symbolic capital (centrality equals status). Similarly, among residents, a wide palette of myths surfaced: *"the building survived many earthquakes, so it must be safe"*, *"it's built on ball bearings"*, *"the building stands on tracks"*, *"small earthquakes relieve tectonic pressure so big ones won't happen"* ,*"this is a Japanese-engineered building,"* or *"this building housed secret service officials (Securitate), they wouldn't have lived here if it wasn't solid"*, *"they retrofitted the building with anti-seismic plaster after 1977."* Such beliefs are extremely dangerous because they foster collective inaction, both among individuals and among the authorities responsible for seismic risk management. The consequences of this inaction, however, will ultimately fall on the very people lulled into a false sense of safety.

5. Discussion

The findings of this research reveal that in Bucharest, seismic risk is not merely perceived as a physical characteristic of the built environment but as a lived, negotiated, and internalized experience. Vulnerability is not simply the outcome of an imminent natural hazard; it is a social construction, reflecting historical inequalities, deep-seated mistrust in public institutions, and infrastructural precarity. This network of social, psychological, and cultural factors shapes affective relationships to risk and subtly sustains a vicious cycle of inaction, leaving the city suspended in a state of chronic vulnerability.

One of the major themes emerging from this research is the deep-seated dichotomy between *perceived vulnerability* and *lived vulnerability*. Residents of

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[3] Emergency categories, which in the public perception are considered less severe than official seismic risk classifications (R1, R2, R3). However, all these emergency categories are currently equivalent to Risk Category I (R1), commonly referred to in Romania as the "red dot" (bulină roșie) designation – a label used to mark buildings with high seismic vulnerability that require urgent structural reinforcement.

buildings constructed prior to 1977 inhabit spaces marked by technical fragility, yet their perceptions often differ significantly. This discrepancy helps explain why initiatives aimed at structural consolidation or relocation frequently encounter resistance. For experts, risk is measurable and objective, expressed through engineering calculations; for residents, risk is diffuse, abstract, and often minimized through mistrust of authorities and the invocation of urban myths about the reliability of older constructions. Thus, risk becomes a relative experience, filtered through cultural and social lenses. For this reason, understanding vulnerability requires acknowledging its cultural and affective dimensions as well.

The CERC framework introduced earlier in this study provides a holistic approach to understanding seismic risk by integrating all its layers – from technical phenomena to affective experiences. *Calculation* refers to the existence of technical assessments and data regarding risk; *Experience* encompasses personal and collective memories and lived encounters with risk; *Recognition* implies the explicit acknowledgment of danger as a real and present threat, by both individuals and the state; and finally, *Consciousness* entails a deeper awareness and acceptance of belonging to a vulnerable group, one that can catalyse concrete action. Without passing through all these stages, seismic risk remains marginalized in the collective imaginary, regardless of expert warnings or the visible reminders of past collapses. Public information campaigns must move beyond technical brochures to become cultural interventions – interventions capable of reshaping affective perceptions and creating a shared social consciousness of vulnerability, one rooted in the everyday lived realities of the city.

Another important dimension to emphasize is the symbolic role of housing in the construction of urban identity. Publicly acknowledging that one lives in a seismically vulnerable building is more than a technical statement – it is a reflection of social positioning. The building becomes an extension of the individual's reputation, a kind of *social marker card* or *badge of identity*. In a city where housing is a powerful marker of identity, acknowledging vulnerability is often seen as a form of social stigma.

Similarly, the enduring myth of the "good buildings" constructed before 1977 – reinforced through the very act of continuous habitation – normalizes risk. The narrative that *"these buildings have survived two major earthquakes"* becomes a mechanism for reducing anxiety and an affective justification for inaction. In a paradoxical turn, the everyday experience of living in fragile spaces strengthens the perception that "it is still safe to live here," thus feeding a counter-narrative that stands in stark contrast to engineering assessments.

Fragile buildings, urban poverty, institutional fragmentation, and cultural mechanisms of risk banalization weave together into an intricate network of overlapping vulnerabilities. Real seismic risk reduction cannot be achieved outside of the specific social and cultural context of Bucharest. Ultimately, an effective strategy for mitigating seismic risk must be simultaneously engineering-driven, socially grounded, and culturally sensitive. Its success depends on the integration

of scientific calculation with the collective and individual recognition of shared fragility.

6. Conclusions

Although earthquakes are unpredictable as natural events, they become tragically predictable as disasters when they strike a population already structurally and socially weakened. Residents live not only with the fear of an earthquake but also with economic insecurity, social isolation, and the absence of consistent public support. The perception of risk is deeply shaped by cultural and symbolic factors, while adaptive behaviours – such as denial, defensive humour, and urban myths – contribute to maintaining a chronic state of vulnerability. It is not merely the absence of structural reinforcement that explains the heightened risk, but also the way in which vulnerable domestic spaces are metamorphosed into *(a)home*, becoming simultaneously sites of safety and invisible danger.

This research has demonstrated that the perception of seismic risk is often culturally and affectively constructed, shaped by urban myths and symbolic adaptation strategies. Lived vulnerability, which transcends engineering grids and statistical models, varies according to individuals' tenure status, income, and social networks. Moreover, institutional inaction not only sustains but actively reproduces vulnerability over time, through a lack of coherent policies and an inability to foster community social capital. A critical aspect highlighted is that acknowledging one's residence in a vulnerable building is not merely a technical evaluation – it is an act of social self-definition. The building becomes an extension of the individual's social image, a veritable urban business card. Living in a building deemed solid conveys prestige, admitting to living in a fragile one risks stigma, which helps explain the reluctance to acknowledge vulnerability. Similarly, the myth of "good" pre-war buildings, reinforced through continuous habitation, embeds risk into everyday reality and normalizes it. Through such residence, the cultural narrative that "if the building survived two major earthquakes, it would survive future ones" is perpetuated, minimizing the perceived urgency of intervention. Reducing this vulnerability requires more than technical solutions; it demands the active engagement of residents in consolidation efforts, the collective responsibility of property owners, and the cultivation of local solidarity. Consolidation cannot rest solely on individual shoulders – it requires collective pressure on responsible authorities, and genuine collaboration among the state, private sector, civil society, and residents' associations.

Furthermore, this research has shown that the analysis and management of seismic risk necessitate the integration of the conceptual framework proposed here – CERC (Calculation, Experience, Recognition, Consciousness) – to better understand how risk is internalized and why collective action often fails to materialize. Thus, *lived vulnerability* and *perceived vulnerability* are not mere analytical labels, they are layered realities in which public danger symbolically dissolves into domestic space and becomes part of the urban everyday.

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EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AND EQUITY IN THE INTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN ROMANIA

Cristina VELICICO[1]

Abstract: In the context of the humanitarian crisis caused by the armed conflict in Ukraine, this research aims to examine the complex challenges associated with the educational integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania. The study explores language barriers, curricular discrepancies, limited access to educational resources, and the socio-cultural integration difficulties faced by refugee students. Based on an extensive analysis of the existing literature, educational policies, and empirical data, the research investigates the strategies implemented to ensure equity and access to education in this crisis context. At the same time, it highlights the ethical and institutional challenges inherent in managing this process, emphasizing the need for flexible and inclusive approaches. The study also proposes future directions for improving educational integration, focusing on the importance of cooperation between authorities, educational institutions, and civil society organizations. In this way, the research not only addresses immediate challenges but also contributes to a broader theoretical and practical framework regarding the educational integration of refugees, underscoring the role of education as a crucial factor in the process of recovery and social reconstruction in times of crisis.

Keywords: educational integration, Romania, language barriers, curricular disparities, socio-cultural integration, educational equity, crisis context, Ukrainian refugees.

Résumé : Dans le contexte de la crise humanitaire générée par le conflit armé en Ukraine, cette recherche vise à examiner les défis complexes liés à l'intégration éducative des réfugiés ukrainiens en Roumanie. L'étude explore les barrières linguistiques, les disparités curriculaires, l'accès limité aux ressources éducatives et les difficultés d'intégration socio-culturelle rencontrées par les élèves réfugiés. Basée sur une analyse approfondie de la littérature existante, des politiques éducatives et des données empiriques, la recherche examine les stratégies mises en place pour garantir l'équité et l'accès à l'éducation dans ce contexte de crise. Parallèlement, elle met en lumière les défis éthiques et institutionnels inhérents à la gestion de ce processus, soulignant la nécessité d'approches flexibles et inclusives. L'étude propose également des pistes futures pour améliorer l'intégration éducative, en insistant sur l'importance de la coopération entre les autorités, les institutions éducatives et les organisations de la société civile. Ainsi, la recherche ne répond pas seulement aux défis immédiats, mais contribue également à un cadre théorique et pratique plus large concernant l'intégration éducative des réfugiés, mettant en évidence le rôle de l'éducation comme facteur essentiel dans le processus de récupération et de reconstruction sociale en période de crise.

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Rezumat: În contextul crizei umanitare generate de conflictul armat din Ucraina, această cercetare îşi propune să examineze provocările complexe asociate integrării educaţionale a refugiaţilor ucraineni în România. Studiul explorează barierele lingvistice, discrepanţele curriculare, accesul limitat la resurse educaţionale şi dificultăţile de integrare socio-culturală cu care se confruntă elevii refugiaţi. Fundamentată pe o analiză amplă a literaturii de specialitate, a politicilor educaţionale şi a datelor empirice, cercetarea investighează strategiile implementate pentru a asigura echitatea şi accesul la educaţie în acest context de criză. În acelaşi timp, sunt evidenţiate provocările etice şi instituţionale inerente în gestionarea acestui proces, subliniind necesitatea unor abordări flexibile şi incluzive. Studiul propune, de asemenea, direcţii viitoare pentru îmbunătăţirea integrării educaţionale, punând accent pe importanţa cooperării dintre autorităţi, instituţiile de învăţământ şi organizaţiile societăţii civile. În acest mod, cercetarea nu doar că răspunde provocărilor imediate, ci contribuie şi la un cadru teoretic şi practic mai larg privind integrarea educaţională a refugiaţilor, subliniind rolul educaţiei ca factor esenţial în procesul de recuperare şi reconstrucţie socială într-un context de criză.

1. Introduction

The ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine has triggered one of the largest humanitarian crises in recent history, displacing millions of people and forcing many to seek refuge in neighboring countries, including Romania. Among the most vulnerable groups are the children and youth who, in addition to fleeing violence and instability, face significant challenges in accessing education. The integration of Ukrainian refugee students into the Romanian educational system is not only a matter of humanitarian aid but also a critical issue for the future of these young individuals, as education plays a central role in their long-term well-being and societal integration.

From the perspective of this research, socio-cultural integration refers to the dynamic process through which refugee students gradually acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and behavioral patterns necessary to function effectively in the host society while preserving their own cultural identity. It encompasses not only linguistic adaptation, but also the development of intercultural competencies, participation in school and community life, the ability to form social relationships with peers, and the internalization of shared norms and values within the educational environment. Socio-cultural integration is thus understood as a bidirectional and inclusive process, requiring both the adjustment of refugees and the openness of host institutions to cultural diversity. This multidimensional perspective underscores the importance of addressing social, emotional, and cultural factors in tandem with academic inclusion efforts.

This article explores the complex challenges associated with the educational integration of Ukrainian refugees in Romania, with a particular focus

on the barriers they face in accessing and benefiting from the educational system. These challenges include language differences, curricular gaps, and the socio-cultural integration of students in new educational environments. Furthermore, the article examines the strategies implemented by Romanian authorities, educational institutions, and civil society organizations to ensure equitable access to education for Ukrainian refugee students. In this context, the research underscores the importance of a flexible and inclusive approach to education that not only accommodates the immediate needs of displaced students but also fosters their long-term integration into Romanian society.

Through an extensive review of the existing literature, educational policies, and empirical data, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the current situation, identifies key challenges, and proposes solutions to enhance the educational experiences of Ukrainian refugee students. The findings aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse on refugee education, offering insights into the role of education as a fundamental tool for social recovery and reconstruction in times of crisis.

According to official data provided by the General Inspectorate for Immigration (IGI), as of December 31, 2024, a total of 177,914 Ukrainian citizens have been granted temporary protection in Romania due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. As shown in Figure 1, the age distribution of beneficiaries highlights the significant scale of the displacement caused by the war, particularly among children and youth. In addition, 4,507 Ukrainian citizens have applied for asylum in Romania during the same period, reflecting the continued need for international protection. These numbers underscore the urgency of addressing the challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees, particularly in the field of education, as integrating displaced students into the Romanian educational system is essential for their long-term social and economic inclusion. The large influx of refugees necessitates coordinated efforts between national authorities, educational institutions, and civil society organizations to ensure that the rights of these refugees, including access to quality education, are upheld. (General Inspectorate for Immigration, 2024).

According to the "Report on the Integration of Ukrainian Refugees in Romania" (2024), published by the Romanian Government, the age distribution of Ukrainian refugees granted temporary protection reveals several significant demographic trends. Between February 24, 2022, and October 31, 2024, the most represented groups were minors aged 7–18 and adults within the broad 19–64 range. While the adult category encompasses multiple life stages – from young adults to individuals nearing retirement age – the report does not provide further disaggregation of this group. In contrast, the 7–18 age group stands out due to its substantial size, largely influenced by recent conscription regulations in Ukraine, which require individuals aged 16 and above to register with military authorities. As a result, many adolescents and young adults fled the country to avoid enlistment, contributing to the increased number of youth refugees. This demographic trend reflects not only the ongoing humanitarian and legal challenges but also emphasizes the urgent need to address the specific educational and

psychosocial needs of displaced children and teenagers. Ultimately, the data highlights the complexity of the refugee crisis and underlines the importance of age-sensitive integration policies tailored to diverse life stages.
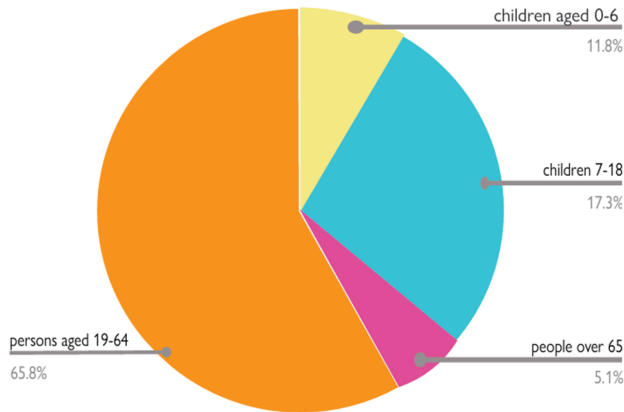
Figure 1. Distribution of beneficiaries of temporary protection registered in Romania in the period 24.02.2022 – 31.10.2024 according to age.
Source: Report on the Integration of Ukrainian Refugees in Romania, 2024

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has resulted in a massive influx of refugees, particularly children and adolescents, whose integration into the Romanian educational system faces multiple challenges. Among the primary obstacles are language barriers, curricular differences, the psychological impact of displacement, and limited access to educational resources.

The language barrier is a major challenge, as many Ukrainian children face difficulties in adapting to the language of instruction, which affects both their academic progress and social integration. According to a report by UNHCR, between 30 percent and 50 percent of the approximately 5.9 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe are children. However, only about half of these children have been enrolled in schools in host countries for the 2022-2023 school year (UNHCR, 2023). This highlights the significant educational challenges that refugee children face in host countries, where language and curriculum differences are compounded by limited support and resources.

According to an article published by Edupedu.ro (2023), Romania has implemented significant measures to facilitate the integration of Ukrainian refugee children into the national education system. These measures include offering Romanian language courses for both students and teachers, adapting curricula, and enrolling refugee children in schools across various regions of the country. Additionally, training sessions were organized for teachers to help them support the integration of Ukrainian students and understand the cultural and educational barriers these children face. The authorities also collaborated with international organizations and NGOs to provide additional support, including psychological counseling, considering the trauma caused by the ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine.

However, the article highlights that, despite these efforts, the support provided to Ukrainian children in overcoming educational and language barriers has been generally limited. The language barrier remains one of the greatest obstacles to integration, and many children have struggled to adapt to a new educational system, facing challenges in both academic performance and social integration. Additionally, the lack of adequate educational resources, such as materials and accessible technologies, has further hindered the integration process. While around 60 percent of Ukrainian children have been enrolled in schools, many continue to lack consistent support in their educational journey, particularly in terms of language acquisition, academic guidance, and psychological assistance (Edupedu.ro, 2023).

The educational integration of refugee children must be approached not only as a logistical challenge but as a multidimensional process involving language acquisition, socio-cultural adaptation, emotional recovery, and institutional responsiveness. Recent research underscores the importance of combining academic access with holistic support strategies. For instance, studies from Poland—one of the primary host countries for Ukrainian refugees—reveal that schools have employed both systemic and community-based responses, including transitional language programs, spiritual counseling, and partial curriculum alignment to facilitate adaptation (Herbst, 2023; Nazaruk et al., 2023; CEO, 2024). These findings provide valuable comparative insight and highlight the relevance of context-sensitive integration strategies, which can inform Romania's own efforts in aligning educational equity with the realities of forced displacement.

1.1. Research Objective and Methodology

This study aims to investigate the educational integration of Ukrainian refugee children in Romania, with an emphasis on access to education, equity, and the socio-cultural dimensions of inclusion. The research explores both the structural and psychological challenges faced by displaced students, as well as the institutional strategies developed to address these needs in the context of an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

The methodology adopted combines a qualitative document analysis with an applied, practice-informed observational component. The first phase of the research consisted of a structured review of relevant literature, official reports, legislative frameworks, and statistical data published between 2022 and 2024. Sources were selected based on their thematic relevance, institutional authority, and timeliness. Priority was given to documents issued by national authorities (e.g., Ministry of Education, General Inspectorate for Immigration), international organizations (e.g., UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO), and major civil society actors involved in refugee assistance (e.g., Save the Children Romania, World Vision). Access to these materials was ensured through public databases, institutional portals, and partnerships with non-governmental organizations. The analysis focused on identifying systemic barriers, policy responses, and models of educational support for refugee students.

In addition, a practice-based component was developed in collaboration with social workers and field practitioners from Save the Children Romania, in the municipality of Iași. This involved informal observation, peer consultations, and the analysis of non-public institutional data related to the enrollment and support of Ukrainian students in local schools. Although not a formal field study, this embedded perspective offered valuable empirical insights into the everyday dynamics of school-based integration, including the implementation of language support programs, student participation, and community engagement. The combined methodology thus allows for a comprehensive, multilevel understanding of how refugee integration is approached both at policy and practice level.

2. Key Challenges in the Educational Integration of Ukrainian Refugee Children

Ukrainian refugee students in Romania encounter a range of interconnected obstacles that complicate their educational integration. One of the most significant is the linguistic barrier, which extends beyond the mere absence of Romanian language proficiency. In the specific case of forced displacement caused by war, language acquisition is not preceded by a period of preparation or gradual immersion, as might be the case in voluntary migration scenarios. Ukrainian children often enter the Romanian school system abruptly, in the context of trauma, instability, and administrative uncertainty, without any prior exposure to the language of instruction. This sudden immersion amplifies the challenges of adaptation, as students are expected to navigate academic requirements, establish social relationships, and engage with unfamiliar institutional cultures simultaneously. Therefore, in this context, the language barrier becomes not only a pedagogical limitation but also a structural impediment to social inclusion, emotional resilience, and educational continuity.

According to a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019), limited proficiency in the host country's language is a significant barrier to the academic success and well-being of refugee and immigrant students. Research indicates that language fluency is closely linked to student performance across all academic subjects, including those with minimal language content, such as mathematics. Students who do not speak the language of instruction at home are, on average, less academically resilient compared to their peers who are native speakers of the host country's language.

Furthermore, the OECD (2019) highlights that language barriers not only hinder academic achievement but also impede the development of a sense of belonging within the school environment. This lack of integration can lead to social isolation and emotional challenges for refugee students.

The absence of comprehensive language support programs and qualified language instructors exacerbates these difficulties, making it more challenging for refugee students to catch up academically and socially integrate into their new educational settings. Therefore, addressing language proficiency is essential for promoting inclusion and well-being within the educational system.

A further challenge that refugee students face is the curricular disparity between the Ukrainian and Romanian education systems. The differences in subject content, teaching methodologies, and assessment standards necessitate that students quickly adapt to a new academic environment, often without adequate transitional support or orientation. These discrepancies can lead to delays in education and a decline in academic performance (UNHCR, 2023).

Additionally, the psychological trauma resulting from displacement, war-related stress, and the loss of familial and community support networks further impedes cognitive development and learning capacity. The World Health Organization (WHO) underscores that refugee children exposed to conflict are at an increased risk for conditions such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These mental health challenges can significantly hinder their ability to focus, engage socially, and perform well academically (WHO, 2023).

Lastly, access to educational resources remains uneven. Many schools lack sufficient materials tailored for non-native speakers, as well as trained personnel such as school psychologists, intercultural mediators, or special education staff. Infrastructural constraints and limited digital access further exacerbate these issues, especially in rural or underserved areas.

3. Legal and Institutional Framework

The integration of Ukrainian refugee children into the Romanian educational system is governed by a structured legal and institutional framework, developed in response to both international obligations and national priorities. Following the activation of the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC), Romania promptly adopted measures to ensure access to essential services, including education, for displaced persons from Ukraine. According to the European Commission (2022), the Temporary Protection Directive mandates that Member States provide immediate access to the education system under conditions similar to those available to nationals. In this context, Romania adapted its national legislation, primarily through Government Emergency Ordinance No. 20/2022, which regulates the rights of persons benefiting from temporary protection, emphasizing the right of minors to education in public institutions without discrimination (Government of Romania, 2022).

At the institutional level, the Romanian Ministry of Education coordinated the educational response by issuing specific methodological guidelines aimed at facilitating the enrollment and support of refugee students (Ministry of Education Romania, 2023). County School Inspectorates *(Inspectoratele Școlare Județene)* were tasked with implementing these measures at the local level, ensuring that schools were adequately prepared to accommodate Ukrainian students by organizing special language support classes, providing psychosocial support, and establishing remedial programs. Moreover, coordination among several ministries – including the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Health – was strengthened to ensure that the integration of displaced Ukrainians into the education system was

complemented by access to healthcare services and social protection measures (UNHCR Romania, 2023).

In parallel, partnerships with international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have significantly bolstered Romania's capacity to respond to the educational and social needs of Ukrainian refugees. Key organizations, including UNICEF, Save the Children Romania, and the Romanian Red Cross, have played a vital role by providing essential support, such as distributing educational materials, organizing language learning programs, offering psychosocial support, and facilitating extracurricular activities designed to promote social inclusion (UNICEF Romania, 2024; Save the Children Romania, 2023).

Furthermore, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has actively collaborated with Romanian authorities to strengthen institutional responses and advocate for the protection of refugee children's rights within the education system.

Despite these coordinated efforts, significant challenges remain. Recent reports indicate that many schools continue to struggle with shortages of trained personnel, inadequate funding for specialized programs, and insufficient infrastructure, particularly in rural areas (Edupedu.ro, 2023). These challenges highlight the urgent need for sustained investment in teacher training, the development of culturally responsive curricula, and the creation of long-term integration strategies that ensure sustainable educational outcomes for refugee students.

The integration of Ukrainian refugee children into the Romanian educational system involves two primary pathways: enrollment as **auditors** (*audienți*) or as **regular students** (*elevi/studenți*). According to Romanian legislation, refugee children who do not have the necessary documentation to prove their educational background are initially registered in schools as *auditors.* This status allows them to participate in educational integration activities, such as Romanian language courses and psychological counseling, but does not involve participation in official assessments or the receipt of grades and diplomas (Ministry of Education, 2022).

In order to transition to *student status,* which provides full rights to participate in evaluations, national exams, and receive diplomas, Ukrainian refugees must present their official educational documents or, if unavailable, undergo a *study equivalency process.* This process may involve assessing the student's level of education and conducting tests to determine their academic proficiency (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Rights/Obligations	Audient	Student
Right to Participate in Classes	Yes	Yes

Right to Exams and Assessments	No	Yes
Right to Academic Credits	No	Yes
Access to School Resources	Limited (e.g., library access, but no official support)	Full access (e.g., academic support, library, extracurricular activities)
Obligations (attendance, coursework)	Minimal (no formal obligations)	Full obligations (attendance, homework, assessments)
Social Integration in School Community	Limited (audients are typically not part of school events)	Full (participation in school events, peer interaction)
Legal Recognition	None (no diploma or official qualification)	Full (diploma or certificate upon completion)

Figure 2. Comparative Table: Rights and Obligations of Students vs. Audients
(author's own elaboration based on comparative educational frameworks)

This table (Fig. 2) illustrates the asymmetry between the two statuses with respect to rights, responsibilities, and access to educational capital. The student status grants access to structured learning processes, social integration, and formal validation, while the audient remains peripheral, both administratively and socially.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that auditors do benefit from the right to attend classes. Although this form of participation does not equate to full academic inclusion, it provides a valuable opportunity for exposure to the host educational system, peer interaction, and language immersion. In many cases, this access functions as a preliminary phase that may facilitate the transition toward full student status, especially when accompanied by institutional support.

4. Critical Perspective: Social and Educational Implications of Extended Audient Status

The persistence of an individual in an audient status, especially during formative educational stages, raises significant concerns. While it allows for exposure to educational content, it does not enable full inclusion in institutional processes. The lack of formal recognition, coupled with minimal social integration, may lead to educational marginalization and reduce the likelihood of academic continuity and future employability.

Sociologically, this phenomenon can reinforce existing inequalities, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may be forced into audient roles due to bureaucratic, legal, or socioeconomic barriers (e.g., migration status, poverty, lack of documentation). Prolonged exclusion from certification pathways may hinder not only academic development but also the individual's integration into society.

Thus, from both a pedagogical and policy perspective, audient status should be considered a temporary, exceptional measure, and interventions should aim to facilitate the transition into full student status as swiftly as possible. Institutional strategies should also address the root causes that lead to audient situations in order to uphold the principle of equitable access to education.

5. Statistical Data on the Integration of Ukrainian Refugee Children in Romanian Schools

An analysis of the enrollment dynamics of Ukrainian refugee children in the Romanian educational system between September 2023 and October 2024 reveals a marked upward trend, particularly following the commencement of the 2023–2024 academic year. This increase is attributable both to the continued influx of refugees and to the integration measures adopted by Romanian authorities to facilitate access to education (Monthly Report, 2024). The enrollment data suggest that targeted support initiatives, such as Romanian language courses and preparatory programs, have been instrumental in promoting the educational inclusion of displaced Ukrainian students.

According to the Monthly Report (2024), data collected between September 1 and October 31, 2024, reveal that a significant proportion of Ukrainian children have enrolled in primary and secondary education, reflecting the successful integration of younger age groups into the Romanian school system. A considerable number of adolescents have also been registered in high schools, illustrating a strong commitment to educational continuity among refugee youth. These developments highlight the effectiveness of Romania's educational and linguistic support measures in fostering the integration of refugee children. The stabilization of enrollment figures observed in October 2024 may further suggest a process of ongoing adaptation and a gradual consolidation of Ukrainian students within the Romanian educational framework.

In order to investigate the educational integration of Ukrainian refugee children within the local context of Iaşi, I engaged in an empirical sociological study utilizing official documents and reports provided by local educational authorities. The research was carried out in collaboration with Save the Children Romania, whose expertise and access to relevant institutional data were pivotal in ensuring the comprehensive scope of the study. Employing a mixed-methods approach, I systematically collected and analyzed enrollment data across various educational institutions in Iaşi, focusing on the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that characterize the integration of displaced children into the Romanian educational system.
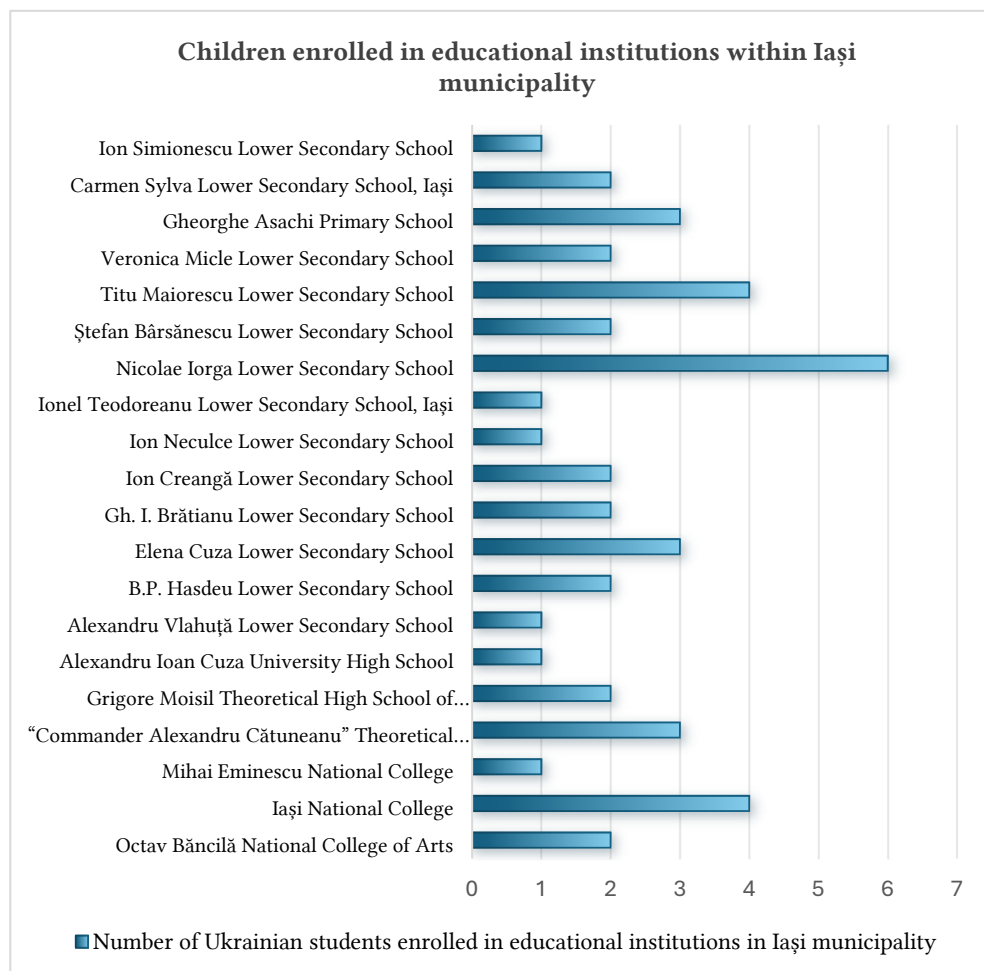
Figure 3. Ukrainian children enrolled in educational institutions within Iași Municipality
Own elaboration based on preliminary data collected by social workers in collaboration with Save the Children Romania (Iași, November 2024)

The results indicate that a significant number of Ukrainian children have been enrolled in various educational institutions, including primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools. Several schools, such as "Ştefan Bârsănescu" Lower Secondary School, "Titu Maiorescu" Lower Secondary School, and Iași National College, have recorded comparable enrollment figures, reflecting localized efforts by school administrations and non-governmental organizations to facilitate educational access for refugee minors. While these figures demonstrate institutional responsiveness, it is important to note that the numbers remain relatively low—ranging between 1 and 6 students per school—and therefore do not suggest statistically significant differences between institutions. The data presented in Figure 3 should be interpreted as illustrative rather than inferential,

offering contextual insight into school-level integration practices rather than allowing for generalizable conclusions. Nevertheless, the observed trend reflects both the resilience of refugee families and the adaptability of host institutions in addressing emerging educational needs. Although the data remains preliminary and has not been formally incorporated into government reports, the analysis provides valuable sociological insight into how educational institutions and local policies mediate the socio-educational integration process. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on refugee education by offering a localized perspective on how educational systems respond to the needs of displaced populations in post-conflict contexts.

6. Solutions Implemented for the Integration of Ukrainian Refugee Children into the Romanian Educational System

In response to the integration of Ukrainian refugee children into the Romanian education system, several specific measures have been implemented to address the challenges related to language barriers, psychological trauma, and educational adaptation. These interventions include intensive Romanian language courses, specialized preparatory classes, teacher training, and psychological support services, each designed to facilitate a smooth and effective transition.

First, intensive Romanian language courses represent a fundamental component of the integration strategy for refugee children. These courses are organized in accordance with the guidelines established by the Romanian Ministry of Education, aiming to enhance the language proficiency of displaced students. In line with the Ministry's policies, these courses typically offer up to 6 hours of instruction per week, tailored to the students' age and proficiency levels. The focus is on improving vocabulary, grammar, and basic conversational skills, which allows students to communicate more effectively within the classroom and engage in academic activities. According to official reports from the Ministry of Education, such measures are crucial for overcoming the language barriers that often impede academic success and social integration for refugee children (Ministry of Education, 2023).

The DEC2B project, implemented by World Vision Romania, addresses key challenges faced by Ukrainian refugee children in the integration process into the Romanian educational system. In the context of this initiative, over 1,600 children received vital support, including Romanian language courses essential for overcoming linguistic barriers. The project established nine "Happy Bubble" centers, which serve as socio-educational hubs offering not only educational assistance but also psychological support, helping refugee children adapt to their new environment. These centers provide early childhood education, after-school care, hot meals, and school supplies, ensuring that the children's basic needs are met. Furthermore, the project fosters social cohesion by organizing joint activities with over 2,000 Romanian children, promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding. The involvement of local authorities and civil society organizations

strengthens the implementation of these solutions, ensuring that refugee children have access to inclusive educational opportunities (World Vision Romania, 2024).

In addition to the educational measures aimed at linguistic and academic integration, Romania has incorporated psychological support services within its educational system to address the significant psychological challenges faced by many refugee children. Recognizing the trauma resulting from displacement, including issues such as anxiety, grief, and post-traumatic stress, schools have integrated specialized psychological support through the deployment of trained counselors and psychologists. These professionals provide individualized and group therapy sessions to help students manage emotional difficulties, ensuring that psychological barriers do not impede their academic performance or social adaptation. The provision of mental health services is considered a critical component of the holistic approach to refugee integration, as it directly contributes to the overall well-being of children and enhances their capacity to engage meaningfully in the educational process and wider community (UNHCR, 2023).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are integral to the integration of Ukrainian refugee children into Romania's educational system, offering targeted support services. These organizations provide psychological assistance to help children manage trauma from displacement, while also delivering social counseling and material aid to ease the immediate challenges of resettlement. A critical component of their work is the provision of **Romanian language courses**, which enable both children and adults to overcome linguistic barriers and engage meaningfully within the educational environment and broader community. Through these efforts, NGOs not only address immediate integration challenges but also play a significant role in long-term adaptation. Furthermore, NGOs engage in **advocacy**, influencing national policies to ensure the educational and social rights of refugees are upheld, contributing to a more inclusive system that recognizes and responds to the specific needs of displaced populations (UNHCR, 2023).

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has examined the multifaceted process of integrating Ukrainian refugee children into the Romanian educational system, with a focus on access, equity, and socio-cultural adaptation. Based on the analysis of institutional documents and empirical data, the main conclusion that emerges is that Romania has achieved a moderate level of educational access and equity for Ukrainian refugees. While significant measures have been adopted – such as emergency legislative provisions, Romanian language support programs, and NGO partnerships – these remain unevenly implemented and insufficiently coordinated across regions.

A defining feature of the Romanian integration model is its reliance on rapid assimilation into the national educational framework, often without transitional structures or bilingual alternatives. In contrast, neighboring countries such as Poland or Slovakia have developed more flexible approaches, including

temporary Ukrainian-language support or adapted bridging curricula. Despite these differences, Romania's efforts have enabled thousands of children to enter formal schooling, a fact that should not be overlooked.

When compared to neighboring Poland, where refugee integration has benefited from broader language proximity, temporary curriculum flexibility, and faith-based psychosocial support mechanisms (Nazaruk et al., 2023; CEO, 2024), Romania's approach appears more centralized and structurally uniform, relying heavily on assimilation into the national education system. While both models present strengths and constraints, the Polish case illustrates the value of diversified tools – particularly at local and school level – for fostering meaningful educational inclusion.

One of the key empirical insights of this study is that even partial inclusion – such as auditor status – can serve as a stepping stone toward full educational integration, provided that institutional support is in place. However, persistent structural barriers, such as the lack of specialized staff, underdeveloped intercultural programs, and limited psychological assistance, continue to affect both the quality and sustainability of inclusion.

Future efforts should prioritize long-term strategies that move beyond emergency response. These include: expanding second-language instruction programs; enhancing teacher training in intercultural pedagogy; streamlining the recognition of prior learning from Ukraine; and fostering institutional partnerships across regions. Such improvements would not only enhance educational outcomes for refugee students but also strengthen the resilience and inclusiveness of the Romanian education system as a whole.

Ultimately, the integration of refugee children must be understood not only as a logistical challenge, but as a long-term investment in social cohesion and democratic stability within a rapidly changing European context.

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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS. THE CASE OF FRAMEWORK PLANS ESTABLISHED IN ROMANIAN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Delia KRECH[1]

Abstract. This article explores high school students' perspectives on the framework plans for high school education in Romania, which have recently been the subject of public debate. Consulting students on any important detail of the instructional and educational process has become a common practice in our country in recent years, initiated by the Ministry of Education. How students perceive the impact of the proposed changes on their educational path becomes an essential component of sociological studies and educational sciences. The results presented in this article refer to a representative sample of students from Hunedoara County, on which County Center for Educational Resources and Assistance (CJRAE) Hunedoara conducted an in-depth research in February 2025. We have insisted in this article on the differences in perception between students according to their gender, to identify whether there are significant statistical differences. In our analysis, we also considered that students' perspectives may be influenced by additional variables, such as year of study, class type, quality of teaching methods, and school culture, which could further accentuate gender differences. The research hypotheses focused on: (1) gender differences in students' level of awareness, understanding, and perceived usefulness of the proposed changes to the curricular framework plans and (2) differences by academic track (and gender) regarding proposals to increase study hours. The research revealed not only the gender differences between the requests for extension of the respective classes but also, surprisingly, the tendency of students to have more hours from dominant curricular areas in other study tracks.

Keywords: framework plans, curriculum, gender differences, study tracks, curricular areas.

Résumé : Cet article explore les perspectives des lycéens sur les plans-cadres de l'enseignement secondaire en Roumanie, qui ont récemment fait l'objet d'un débat public. Consulter les élèves sur tout aspect important du processus éducatif est devenu une pratique courante dans notre pays ces dernières années, grâce à l'initiative du Ministère de l'Éducation. La manière dont les élèves perçoivent l'impact des changements proposés sur leur parcours éducatif constitue désormais une composante essentielle des études sociologiques et des sciences de l'éducation. Les résultats présentés dans cet article portent sur un échantillon représentatif d'élèves du département de Hunedoara, sur lequel le Centre départemental de ressources et d'assistance éducatives (CJRAE) Hunedoara a mené une étude approfondie en février 2025. Nous avons insisté dans cet article sur les différences de

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perception entre les élèves selon leur genre, afin d'identifier s'il existe des différences statistiques significatives. Dans notre analyse, nous avons également pris en compte que les perspectives des élèves pourraient être influencées par des variables supplémentaires, telles que l'année d'études, le type de classe, la qualité des méthodes pédagogiques et la culture scolaire, ce qui pourrait accentuer davantage les différences de genre. Les hypothèses de recherche se sont concentrées sur : (1) les différences de genre concernant le niveau de conscience, la compréhension et l'utilité perçue des modifications proposées des plans-cadres curriculaires ; (2) les différences selon la filière académique (et le genre) concernant les propositions d'augmentation du volume horaire d'études. L'étude a révélé non seulement des différences de genre dans les demandes d'extension des cours concernés, mais aussi, de manière surprenante, une tendance des élèves à souhaiter davantage d'heures dans les domaines curriculaires dominants d'autres filières d'études.

Mots-clés : plans-cadres, programme d'études, différences entre les sexes, filières d'études, domaines curriculaires.

Rezumat: Acest articol detaliază percepțiile elevilor de liceu referitoare la planurile cadru din Romania, aflate, de curând, în dezbatere publică. Consultarea elevilor cu privire la orice detaliu important al procesului instructiv-educativ a devenit o practică curentă în țara noastră în ultimii ani, prin inițiativa Ministerului Educației. Modul cum percep elevii impactul schimbărilor propuse asupra parcursului lor educațional devine o componentă esențială de studii sociologice și de științe ale educației. Rezultatele prezentate în acest articol se referă la un eșantion reprezentativ de elevi din județul Hunedoara, asupra căruia Centrul Județean de Resurse și Asistență Educațională (CJRAE) Hunedoara a făcut o cercetare aprofundată în februarie 2025. Am insistat în acest articol pe diferențele de percepție dintre elevi după genul acestora, pentru a identifica în ce măsură există diferențe statistice semnificative. În analizele noastre am ținut cont de faptul că reprezentările elevilor pot fi influențate și de alte variabile (anul de studii, calitatea demersului educativ, cultura școlară etc.), variabile care pot fi utilizate pentru a reliefa mai pregnant diferențele de gen. Ipotezele cercetării au testat diferențele de gen în ce privește gradul de informare, de cunoaștere și de utilitate percepută despre propunerile de modificare a planurile cadru curriculare. O altă ipoteză a testat diferențele după filiere și gen în ce privește propunerile de extindere a orelor de studiu. Cercetarea a relevat nu numai diferențele pe genuri între cererile de extindere a orelor respective ci și, surprinzător, tendința elevilor de a avea mai multe ore din arii curriculare dominante în alte filiere de studiu.

Cuvinte cheie: planuri cadru, curriculum, diferențe de gen, filiere de studiu, arii curriculare.

1. Introduction. Considerations about the Framework Plans

The framework curricula are reference documents that establish the structure and organization of the national curriculum for each education cycle. They determine the compulsory and optional subjects, the number of hours allocated to each subject, and their distribution during the years of study. Currently, high school education in Romania operates based on the framework plans approved in 2009. However, in the context of social and educational changes, a new version of the framework plan is under public debate, which proposes greater curricular flexibility, including by increasing the number of optional

subjects in the CDEOS category (Curriculum at the Student's and School's Decision). These changes aim to better adapt to the needs and interests of students, giving them greater freedom in choosing their educational path. The Ministry of Education and Research (2025) has published the current draft framework plans for high-school education, with the official consultation period running from January 31 to March 6, 2025.

Within the document, it is specified that is proposes *a curricular paradigm centred on predictability, equity, flexibility and relevance*, the stakes being truly ambitious: avoiding overload, the possibility of adjustments along the way, the imposition of specialization (for the final grades), flexibility for students' options and, last but not least, an educational offer attentive to the requirements of the labour market. It is then mentioned as a center of interest, 'the fulfilment of the potential of each student', regardless of the course or study profile. The curriculum must not only be clarified, but also permanently evaluated. The directions of development are based on: transversal competences, basic competences in disciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts, new technologies, educational inclusion, cultural diversity, teachers' competences, the needs of the labour market, collaboration between educational actors at all levels, periodic updating of the curriculum, monitoring, evaluation and revision of the curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2025).

During that period, numerous meetings and debates took place, attended by representatives of teachers, trade unions, parents, and students. Such debates are considered current practices, if we refer, for example, to the OECD, which ensures permanent consultation of all those involved in the teaching process, from teachers to managers of educational institutions, as well as students/learners (OECD, 2019a, 2020). In 2024, the OECD has proposed a broad analysis on the flexibility and autonomy of the school curriculum (OECD, 2024c), which it considers part of a broader reflection on the future-oriented curriculum.

2. Gender differences in educational choices

Gender differences in educational choices are of great interest for social research and beyond. The interest in certain subjects, the choice or rejection of other subjects are often linked to social stereotypes. For example, the fact that girls are dominant in preferences for the humanities and biology but avoid physics or information technology (IT) specialization, has already been highlighted in an OECD study (2019b). The same study recalled that girls usually outperform boys in 'reading skills'; boys, in turn, slightly outperformed girls in mathematics (but there are 12 countries where girls are better); in science, girls outperformed boys by 2 points on average, performing better in 34 countries; girls are much less interested in a career in Information Technology (the study cited above approximated 15% of girls with an interest physics or Information Technology).

Another suggestive report prepared by the European Commission (2021), entitled *She figures 2021 – Gender in research and innovation – Statistics and indicators*, provides additional data on orientation discrepancies between boys and

girls. That is why numerous programs „to tackle gender stereotypes in girls' and boys' education and career interests" (EC, 2021, p. 125) have been initiated. In over 30 countries, an event known as Girls' Day is organized, and according to the same report, in Germany, girls in grades 5-10 visit companies, universities, and research institutes to increase the interest on different fields. As a result of these activities, 70% of the girls' report discovering professions they are interested in, and 41% expressed interest in pursuing different internships at those companies. Another initiative called Boys' Day deals with male students, so that they can explore areas such as health or education (fields considered feminine). After such events, the boys' interest in these fields increased significantly.

In Belgium, another initiative, named 'Girls Day, Boys Day' „invites girls and boys to discover the world of work by presenting them professions with "female" connotations but practised by men and with professions with "male" connotations but practised by women" (Wroblewski, 2018, p. 64). The aim was to encourage students to avoid stereotypes in their own choices. In the Netherlands, similar activities are organised to stimulate girls' interest in exact sciences and technology.

Many other studies have pointed out that gender differences are more cultural than biological. Girls tend to exclude themselves from areas considered "masculine", and boys avoid "feminine" ones due to social pressure. Schools that apply gender-conscious guidance policies succeed in bridging this gap.

The choices during high school will have an impact on an already unequal labour market. The cited report also shows that

> *despite EU legal and policy commitments, a range of gender inequalities persist, not least in R&I. These include segregation of women and men PhD graduates across different fields of study, the under-representation of women in Science and Technology occupations (including entrepreneurship and innovation), gender differences in researchers' working conditions, gender inequalities in career advancement and decision-making, and more* (EC, 2021, p. 18).

According to an information note published by the French Ministry of National Education, at the beginning of the 2023 school year, artistic subjects, including "plastic arts", were more frequently chosen by female students, with percentages of more than 80%. In the case of the subject "Foreign and regional languages, literatures and cultures" (LLCER), 72.6% of the students who chose this specialization were girls. On the other hand, boys predominate in the choices of the subjects "Digital and computer sciences", "Engineering sciences and physical sciences" or "Physical education, sports practices and culture", the percentages being over 70% (Dauphin, 2024).

Also, the trends in the choice of A-level subjects in the UK are indicated in an article published by Thompson (2023), which highlights that, between 2021 and 2022, girls were the majority in subjects such as psychology, sociology, English, art

and design, while boys dominated in physics, computer science, advanced mathematics.

Educational choices and gender differentiations have been intensively studied in recent decades. For example, Eccles et al. (1983) presented a model entitled "Expectation-Value" to explain academic motivation and educational choices, including in the context of gender differences. Within this model, it is considered that performance and educational choice are determined by two key concepts: expectancy, i.e., how well students think they will perform, and task value, how important an activity is for them. The impact of gender socialization on these two dimensions is analysed, revealing that girls and boys develop different expectations and values depending on gender. Parsons et al. (1984) empirically test the model, the results showing that gender differences in motivation arise not from different abilities, but from social expectations (gender roles), differentiated feedback from parents and teachers, early experiences, and learning opportunities. Girls tend to underestimate their skills in mathematics, even if they perform well, due to the lower value attributed to this field and the low expectations of success (Parsons et al., 1984).

Summarizing the perspective of Eccles et al. (1983), educational choices are not only a reflection of abilities, but especially of values and expectations, which are socially formed. Thus, girls may avoid areas such as mathematics or physics not because they can't, but because they don't expect them to perform and don't consider them relevant or interesting (low value). These perceptions are influenced by parents, teachers, the media, and the dominant culture.

Another author, Fan (2011), applies the Expectation-Value model to examine social influences on school motivation and gender differences. His study shows that teacher-student relationships and the academic values of the peer group influence students' task values, with significant differences between boys and girls. It is also highlighted that these values and educational expectations are related to the academic commitment of students, with notable gender differences.

Research by Wang & Degol (2013) uses the "Expectancy-Value" model to understand individual and gender differences in career choices in STEM fields. The authors discuss how sociocultural, contextual, biological, and psychological factors influence interests and choices in STEM, highlighting the specific barriers women face in these fields. The results show that girls have a wider range of interests and abilities, but they choose non-STEM fields because they feel more competent and motivated there. The authors believe that interventions should be designed not only to increase girls' interest in physical sciences, computer science, and engineering, but also to increase boys' interest in biological and health sciences.

Legewie & DiPrete (2014) show that high school climate significantly influences choices in STEM. Boys are more encouraged towards the exact sciences, while girls give up physics or computer science more easily in those school environments where gender stereotypes dominate. The differences are not only related to skills, but also to school culture, the support of teachers and colleagues. The authors show the effect of two concrete characteristics of high school on STEM

specialization plans in college: high school curriculum in STEM and gender segregation of extracurricular activities. These two factors have a substantial effect on the gender gap in STEM specialization plans.

The study by Breda & Napp (2019), which analyses individual-level data on 300,000 15-year-old students in 64 countries, reveals that in most countries, girls perform only slightly worse than boys in mathematics, but their reading lead is much higher. This gives girls a comparative advantage in subjects related to reading/literature rather than mathematics, directing them towards humanities careers, where they feel they shine more.

The national longitudinal study (conducted in the USA) by Perez-Felkner et al. (2017) shows how beliefs about one's abilities in mathematics are strong predictors for choosing a path in the STEM field. Girls frequently underestimate their skills and avoid subjects "perceived as difficult", and boys remain more confident in their abilities when faced with challenging math.

The persistence of the gender gap in skills and especially in elections is discussed in many OECD studies. For example, an OECD analysis (2015) reveals that girls perform better than boys in reading in all OECD countries. Boys are more likely to repeat school years and drop out of school. In mathematics, boys have only slightly better results. However, girls are more likely to attend tertiary education, but remain underrepresented in STEM.

A recent OECD study (2024a) highlights the fact that boys and girls have similar graduation rates in secondary education, but differences arise in the choice of fields of study. Girls dominate in education, health and the arts, and boys in engineering, ICT and construction. Women earn less than men on average, even with higher levels of education.

Another OECD analysis (2024b) shows that girls continue to outperform boys in tertiary education: 52% of young women (20-34 years old) have completed higher education, compared to 39% of men. However, women are underrepresented in STEM fields and in leadership positions. Progress is being made, but gaps persist in key areas, especially in the choice of specialisations.

3. Methods: participants, instrument, hypothesis

The debate on the Ministry of Education and Research plans and proposals for change, conducted at the level of CJRAE Hunedoara, also included a quantitative study based on a questionnaire, applied in February 2025 to a representative sample of high school students in the county (the sample size was 1164 students, the margin of error of 2.7%, at a 95% confidence level). The sample structure was as follows:

Table 1. Sample structure

Variables	Features	Common	Percent
Class	Grade IX	313	26.9
	Grade X	349	30
	Grade XI	344	29.5
	Grade XII	158	13.6

Variables	Features	Common	Percent
Gender	Male	485	41.7
	Female	679	58.3
Residence environment	Urban	923	79.3
	Rural	241	20.7
Track/specialization	Theoretical-real	427	36.8
	Theoretical-human	227	19.6
	Vocational	164	14.1
	Technological	343	29.5

The research aimed to do a gender-based analysis to see to what extent there are significant differences between boys and girls in terms of their choices and preferences in a range of dimensions included in the questionnaire.

The research focused on several specific objectives: to assess the degree of information of boys and girls about proposals for draft framework plans and the extent to which they contribute to personal and professional development; differentiated evaluation of school curricula according to the gender of respondents; identifying the main difficulties perceived by boys and girls in the current educational system; identification of the additional demand for teaching hours, depending on the courses and the gender of the students.

Following the objectives pursued, we also tested the following statistical hypotheses:

H1. There are significant statistical differences according to the gender of the students in terms of the possession of the information on the launch of the new framework plans, the degree of knowledge, and the degree of perceived usefulness of it.

H2. There are statistically significant gender differences in proposals for changes to the framework plans.

H3. The proposals to extend the number of hours reserved for educational subjects are significantly different according to the course of study, the gender of the subjects, and the class of study.

4. Research results

In the research conducted in Hunedoara County, the area of interest was much broader, starting from students' opinions and representations regarding the framework plans that were relatively recently opened for public debate. The fact that only half of the pupils had heard of the launch of the draft framework plans for public debate should not be understood as a disadvantage, given the general interest of young people in their training and eventual integration into the labour market.

For example, approximately 80 percent of students confirmed that school schedules are busy or very busy, and more than half consider that the hours of study per week are too many. In this context, students bring to attention a series of legitimate grievances: the fatigue felt at school, the excess of theory during

classes, content that they consider unsuitable for their training, the lack of career counselling. If students want to increase the number of hours in some subjects, at the same time they also want to reduce the hours in other subjects. The measures for such situations are relatively blocked (concerning subjects/disciplines that are intended to be increased/reduced/optional at the same time). However, students advocate that a series of subjects should no longer be compulsory, but only optional, that more emphasis should be placed on practice (direct/interactive), that there should be a modular system of grouping subjects with optional choice, the introduction of new subjects (e.g. financial education or health education/sex education), free options for choosing Baccalaureate subjects depending on the course of study, intensification and diversification of preparation for the Baccalaureate. The students are followers of the modernization of the school infrastructure (with a focus on digitalization), but also of the efficient use of current facilities (with the addition of canteens with natural products). Regarding the actual teaching activity, the students denounced the shortcomings of the evaluation system, as well as the increase in the degree of involvement of teachers. All these proposals can be differentiated by study classes, by courses or by the gender of the respondents.

Below we will briefly present the testing of statistical hypotheses as follows:

H1. There are significant statistical differences according to the gender of the students in terms of the possession of the information on the launch of the new framework plans, the degree of knowledge, and the degree of perceived usefulness of it.

The statistical analysis of the entire sample showed that only 590 students (51.7%) said they had heard of the framework programs, recently put up for public debate. We continued the analysis on the degree of knowledge and perception of the usefulness of the cadres, in terms of personal and professional development. The descriptive results were as follows:

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the variables, *knowledge,*
and *usefulness* of framework plans

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Knowledge	590	1	5	3.039	1.1072
Usefulness	590	1	5	3.114	1.1737
Total	590				

The data reveal a level that exceeds the middle of the [1,5] interval for knowledge and usefulness of the new framework plans (because of the averages slightly exceed the value of 3). To test the statistical hypothesis, we deepened the analysis only on the sample of 590 students. The association analysis applied to this subsample showed that there are no significant differences between boys and girls in terms of the possession of information on the launch of the new framework

plans in public debate (Chi Square = 1.66, df=1, p=0.198). All these students were questioned about the degree of knowledge of the respective framework programs. The analysis did not reveal significant differences between genders, after we tested the hypothesis with the help of a nonparametric test *Two independent samples* (U=40496.5, Z=-0.622, p=0.534). In other words, there are no gender differences: we cannot say that boys or girls know the content of those plans better. Finally, the students were asked to what extent they consider the framework plans (for personal and professional development) to be useful. Also in this case, we did not find significant differences between genders (U=38981, Z=-1.396, p=0.163). In all cases, the hypothesis was not confirmed.

H2. There are statistically significant gender differences in proposals for changes to the framework plans.

These differences are visible in the following table:

Table 3. Proposals to amend the Framework Plans

Proposals	Male (%)	Female (%)
I would reduce the total number of hours per week	67	62
I would introduce more hours of practical training	36	30
I would increase flexibility in choosing options	41	50
I would reduce the number of compulsory subjects	51	53
I wouldn't change a thing	4	6

From the statistical analysis, we deduced that the two variables are associated (Chi Square = 16.93, df=5, p=0.005). In other words, there are significant differences according to the gender of the respondents: boys agree to a greater extent with the *reducing the number of hours per week* and with *introduction of more hours of practical training*, while the girls rather agree with the *increasing flexibility in choosing options* and with *Reducing the number of compulsory subjects*. The hypothesis is confirmed.

H3. The proposals to extend the number of hours reserved for educational subjects are significantly different according to the course of study, the gender of the subjects, and the class of study.

The research on the framework plans and the students' reporting to them also included the evaluation of 19 disciplines. The students were asked to specify which of these subjects they want additional hours of training in, as well as the subjects for which they consider that the number of hours should be reduced. We will deal here with the first of the options: what were the students' choices regarding the subjects/disciplines that they consider more important for their preparation, and for which they would request overtime. An overview of all those disciplines, as well as their distribution by tracks and gender of respondents, can be found in the following table (which contains percentage data):

Table 4. Differences in Options for Study Subjects

Required disciplines:	Theoretically real		Theoretically human		Vocational		Technological	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Physics	47.7	46.2	6.4	2.7	4.9	13.5	27.2	34.1
Foreign Language 2	36.8	12.4	1.3	0.7	9.8	3.2	12.7	5.3
Specialized theory	33.7	9.4	48.7	13.4	19.5	9.5	48	16.5
Mathematics	32.1	46.2	34.6	53	19.5	27	23.1	40.6
Romanian	25.4	50.9	6.4	5.4	4.9	4.8	5.2	11.2
Biology	16.1	20.5	19.2	32.2	19.5	21.4	19.1	21.2
Latin	13.5	12	19.2	15.4	51.2	27	6.4	9.4
Specialized practice	13.5	14.5	16.7	11.4	24.4	44.4	44.5	41.8
Foreign Language 1	12.4	21.4	23.1	28.2	26.8	34.1	8.7	29.4
Socio-human disciplines (psychology, sociology, economics, philosophy)	11.4	6.4	9	1.3	9.8	4.8	11.6	5.9
Information and communications technology (ICT)	11.4	6.4	1.3	1.3	2.4	2.4	8.7	3.5
History	9.3	24.4	0	4	2.4	3.2	2.3	4.1
Arts/Music	8.3	8.1	19.2	40.3	14.6	25.4	6.9	20.6
Physical education	7.8	1.3	17.9	4	2.4	4	12.1	4.7
Computer science	6.7	3	35.9	47.7	31.7	27	19.1	14.7
Geography	5.7	3	26.9	21.5	17.1	15.1	20.8	14.7
Personal Development and Career Counseling	4.1	6.4	2.6	9.4	17.1	22.2	17.3	14.1
Chemistry	1.6	0	3.8	0.7	0	0.8	0.6	0.6
Religion	1	5.6	3.8	4.7	14.6	4.8	4	6.5

Certain trends can be seen in the table above. We can thus see to what extent certain subjects are of greater interest to students or to what extent they are evaluated differently according to the courses of study. Due to the size of this table, the statistical analysis of differences by gender or field of study proves to be difficult to apply. That is why we resorted to distributing the subjects in the table by curricular areas, as follows:

Table 5. Coding of subjects by curricular areas

Curricular areas	Disciplines included
Language and communication	Romanian, Foreign Language 1, Foreign Language 2, Latin
Mathematics and Natural Sciences	Physics, Mathematics, Chemistry, Biology
Human and society	Social and Humanistic Disciplines, History, Religion, Geography
Arts	-

Curricular areas	Disciplines included
Technologies	ICT, Computer Science, Specialized Theory, Specialized Practice
Physical education and sports	-
Counselling and guidance	-

a. Analysis of the requirements of the curricular areas by the course of study

From the statistical analysis, the distribution of the respective curricular areas according to the study tracks was as follows:

Table 6. Distribution of curricular areas by course of study

	Tracks			
	Theoretically real	Theoretically human	Vocational	Technological
Language and communication	80.6	43.2	62.9	39.9
Mathematics and natural sciences	73.3	64.8	48.5	57.1
Human and society	32.6	32.2	29.3	33.5
Arts	8.2	33.0	22.8	13.7
Technologies	43.1	72.2	68.9	72.9
Physical education and sports	4.2	8.8	3.6	8.5
Counseling and guidance	5.4	7.0	21.0	15.7

The statistical analysis showed a significant association between the variables (Chi Square = 417.95, df = 21, p = 0.000). In other words, there are significant differences between the tracks regarding the demand for overtime for the respective curricular areas, the hypothesis being confirmed. For example, 80.6% of the respondents from the real theoretical profile request overtime, dominantly in *Language and Communication* or *Mathematics* and *Natural Sciences*. These demands seem to be contradictory: on the one hand, students request an increasing number of hours in the *Language and Communication* discipline (a sign of a relative lack of emphasis on such disciplines, considering the study track) and, on the other hand, students request an increased number of hours in *Mathematics and natural sciences*-precisely in the discipline considered basic in terms of the high school track. Surely, such a situation needs to be further investigated in order to reach a balance of the respective demands.

From the same Table (no. 6), we observe that students from the vocational track imperatively demand an increase in Technological classes (certainly this type of subject being under-represented in that profile). We observe a relatively constant demand for the area of *Human and Society* in all fields of study. A significant increase is observed in the Vocational and Technological tracks in terms of the need for *Counseling and Orientation* hours. All these differences can be punctually deepened by decision-makers, for better teaching productivity.

b. Analysis of the requirements of the curricular areas according to the gender of the respondents

From the statistical analysis, the distribution of the respective curricular areas according to the gender of students was as follows:

Table 7. Curricular areas distributed by gender

	Gender	
	Male	Female
Language and communication	53.8	62.3
Mathematics and natural sciences	56.7	68.0
Human and society	33.0	31.8
Arts	10.1	21.5
Technologies	70.5	54.6
Physical education and sport	10.5	3.2
Counseling and guidance	9.7	11.9

The statistical analysis showed a significant association between the variables (Chi Square = 107.57.95, df = 7, p = 0.000). The hypothesis is confirmed: there is a statistically significant difference between students' requests for overtime by their gender. We observe, for example, the dominant figures for girls' requests for the area *of Language and Communication* (62.3%), *Mathematics and Natural Sciences* (68%), and *Arts* (21.5%). We also observe the higher percentages of boys in the areas of *Technology* and *Physical Education, and Sports.*

c. Mixed analysis of curricular areas by tracks and gender

By bringing together the curricular areas, the courses of study, and the gender of students, we can also observe the gender differences within each course of study. We have obtained the following situation of overtime requests:

Table 8. Curricular areas distributed by courses and gender

Curricular areas Required:	Tracks							
	Theoretically real		Theoretically human		Vocational		Technological	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Language and communication	75.6	84.6	42.3	43.6	73.2	59.5	30.1	50.0
Mathematics and natural sciences	65.8	79.5	53.8	70.5	39.0	51.6	52.0	62.4
Human and society	27.5	36.8	33.3	31.5	39.0	26.2	37.6	29.4
Arts	8.3	8.1	19.2	40.3	14.6	25.4	6.9	20.6
Technologies	56.5	32.1	82.1	67.1	61.0	71.4	83.2	62.4
Physical education and sports	7.8	1.3	17.9	4.0	2.4	4.0	12.1	4.7
Counseling and guidance	4.1	6.4	2.6	9.4	17.1	22.2	17.3	14.1

The results of the analysis of the association between the variables can be found in the following table (no. 9):

Table 9. Differences between curricular areas by gender, in all fields of study

Pearson Chi-Square Tests				
	Tracks			
	Theoretically real	Theoretically human	Vocational	Technological
	Gender	Gender	Gender	Gender
Chi-square	57.543	38.249	11.199	59.742
Df	7	7	7	7
Sig.	.000*	.000*	0.05*	.000*
Results are based on nonempty rows and columns in each innermost sub-table.				
*. The Chi-square statistic is significant at the .05 level.				

From the above table we deduce that there are statistically significant differences between boys and girls, if we refer to the theoretical real track (Chi Square = 57.54, df = 7 and p = 0.000), to the theoretical human track (Chi Square = 38.24, df = 7 and p = 0.000) or the technological track (Chi Square = 59.74, df = 7 and p = 0.000). In the case of the vocational track, the differences are slightly attenuated, but remain significant (Chi Square = 11.19, df = 7, and p = 0.05). All these conclusions can be extensively examined if we start from the previous table with the specification of the statistical differences between boys and girls:

a. The girls are rather inclined to ask for the supplementation of the subjects included in the following curricular areas: *Language and Communication, Mathematics and Natural Sciences, and Human and Society.* Boys are more interested in *Technologies* and *Physical Education, and sports.* As far as *Counseling* is concerned, the data are very close.

b. Theoretical-human track: Girls want more overtime for *Language and Communication, Mathematics and Natural Sciences, Arts and Counseling*; boys ask for extra hours for the *Human and Society* curricular areas – the figures for girls being very close, but also for *Technologies* or *Education and Sport.*

c. Vocational track: for this track, the statistical differences are significant overall, although the percentages for the two genders are more balanced than in the other cases. Surprisingly, boys ask for overtime for *Language and Communication* or *Human Man and Society.*

d. The technological track (Girls dominate in terms of the demand for overtime in curricular areas such as *Language and Communication, Mathematics and Natural Sciences,* but also in the demand for overtime in the artistic field – in an environment dominated by technical thinking in general).

5. Conclusions

This article emphasized the importance of differentiating the framework plans in pre-university education based on students' gender, starting from their questioning and their involvement in defining/constituting the new curricular framework plans. The initial research carried out in Hunedoara County aimed to be a broad consultation, included in the public debate on the respective framework plans. A questionnaire applied to a representative sample of students was used to conduct a differentiated analysis of students' perceptions based on gender.

A first hypothesis aimed to test gender differences in terms of having the information on the launch of the new framework plans, the degree of knowledge, and their perceived degree of usefulness. We found that out of the entire sample, only 51.7 percent of the students were aware that the respective framework plans had been launched for public debate. The testing of the statistical hypothesis followed the path of this subsample, and we found that there were no differences according to the gender of the students in terms of ownership information on the launch of the new framework plans for public debate, the degree of knowledge of those plans, or perception of their usefulness. The first hypothesis revealed a particularly homogeneous sample of students, with no significant differences according to the gender of the respondents, from which we deduce the general interest of the students in the respective framework plans.

For the second hypothesis (H2) we found a statistically significant difference between genders: boys agreed to a greater extent with the *reducing the number of hours per week* and with *introduction of more hours of practical training*, while the girls rather agreed with the *increasing flexibility in choosing options* and with *Reducing the number of compulsory subjects.*

The evaluation of the requests for additional hours of various disciplines within the H3 hypothesis brought a series of important results in terms of differentiations by study tracks and, within them, of the differences between genders. To simplify the analysis, we have recoded the subjects according to curricular areas. We found that most students from the theoretical real track (80.6%) dominantly requested overtime at *language and communication* or *Mathematics and natural sciences* (hence the contradiction that this field is rather 'masculine'). Students from the Vocational Branch asked for an increase in classes with a technological character. We have noticed a relatively constant demand for the area of *Human and society* in all fields of study. A significant increase is observed in the Vocational and Technological tracks in terms of the need for *Counselling and guidance.* Next, we found a statistically significant difference in students' requests for overtime (from all tracks) based on their gender. The girls' requests were centred on the area of *Language and communication* (62.3%), but also *Mathematics and natural sciences* (68%). The boys additionally asked for hours from the *Technologies* or *Physical Education, and Sport.*

Finally, we considered that gender differences within each track can be a much more applied point in our analysis. We have thus found a series of notable differences by gender, and the conclusion we can draw is that students from certain

tracks suggest supplementing with hours in curricular areas that are dominant in terms of formative influence in other tracks of study. For example, girls from the theoretically real track ask for an additional number of *Language and communication* (as they are overrepresented in the theoretically humanistic track). In their turn, the girls in the theoretically human track are also asking for more hours *of Mathematics and Natural Sciences* (overrepresented in the theoretically real track). Also, the boys in the vocational track ask for overtime hours rather associated with the theoretical human track. Finally, girls in the technological track are asking for additions to *Language and Communication*, *Mathematics, and Natural Sciences classes,* specific to other tracks. We believe that such slips should be treated with interest, and from a sociological perspective, it is recommended to continue the research through qualitative techniques.

In conclusion, the results presented reveal gender differences in the proposals for optimizing the framework plans, as well as the perceived need to increase the number of hours allocated to school subjects. These can be a confirmation of international study data, which reveal gender differences in academic interests in adolescence (Su et al., 2009), with girls preferring *People* and the boys *Things* or reports from other countries indicating gender-different choices of deepening and optional subjects in the final years of high school (Dauphin, 2024). Our results may also be congruent with research showing that educational choices predominantly reflect values and expectations (Eccles et al., 1983), with girls' major choice of mathematics indicating not a preference, but a desire to compensate with additional training for a lesser-known terrain.

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GENDER ROLES AND STEREOTYPES ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract: Social media has become a significant agent of socialization in recent years and it can be seen especially in the way people conceptualize certain topics. This study explores young people's opinions of gender roles and stereotypes as portrayed on social media, but also the ways in which these platforms can influence their expectations of themselves or those around them, through a qualitative research, being used the semi-structured interviews technique. Ten subjects participated - an equal number of women and men - aged between 20 and 27 years old, that are frequent users of social media platforms. Influencers were also included in the study to provide a better understanding into the use of social media. The research focused on several key themes, such as general use of social media platforms, representations of gender roles and stereotypes on social media, gender-based expectations and the impact of social media on young people from the perspective of gender roles and stereotypes. The main findings indicate that social media contains a large variety of gender roles and stereotypes, but the influence on the subjects varies by gender: women experience a greater social pressure to conform to certain gender roles and stereotypes, compared to men. However, the overall results highlight that, for the participants involved, these influences are not perceived as overwhelming.

Keywords: social media, gender stereotypes, gender roles, social media impact.

Résumé : Les réseaux sociaux sont devenus un agent de socialisation majeur ces dernières années, ce qui se reflète notamment dans la manière dont les individus conceptualisent certains sujets. Cette étude explore les opinions des jeunes concernant les rôles de genre et les stéréotypes tels qu'ils sont présentés sur les réseaux sociaux, ainsi que les façons dont ces plateformes peuvent influencer leurs attentes envers eux-mêmes ou envers leur entourage. Il s'agit d'une recherche qualitative basée sur la technique des entretiens semi-directifs. Dix personnes ont participé à l'étude – un nombre égal de femmes et d'hommes – âgées de 20 à 27 ans, toutes utilisatrices fréquentes des plateformes de réseaux sociaux. Des influenceurs ont également été inclus dans l'échantillon afin de mieux comprendre l'usage des réseaux sociaux. La recherche s'est concentrée sur plusieurs thèmes clés : l'utilisation générale des réseaux sociaux, les représentations des rôles de genre et des stéréotypes sur ces plateformes, les attentes liées au genre, ainsi que l'impact des réseaux sociaux sur les jeunes du point de vue des rôles et stéréotypes de genre. Les principaux résultats indiquent que les réseaux sociaux véhiculent une grande variété de rôles et de stéréotypes de genre. Toutefois, l'influence exercée varie selon le genre : les femmes subissent une pression sociale plus forte pour se conformer à certains rôles et stéréotypes

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de genre que les hommes. Cependant, les résultats globaux montrent que, pour les participants, ces influences ne sont pas perçues comme écrasantes.

Mots-clés : médias sociaux, stéréotypes de genre, rôles de genre, l'impact des médias sociaux.

Rezumat: Social media a devenit un agent important de socializare în ultimii ani, lucru vizibil mai ales în modul în care oamenii conceptualizează anumite subiecte. Lucrarea de față explorează opiniile tinerilor cu privire la rolurile de gen și stereotipurile prezentate în social media, dar și modurile în care aceste platforme pot influența așteptările pe care le au față de ei înșiși sau față de cei din jur, printr-o cercetare calitativă, folosind tehnica interviurilor semi-structurate. La studiu au participat zece subiecți – un număr egal de femei și bărbați – cu vârste cuprinse între 20 și 27 de ani, utilizatori frecvenți ai platformelor de social media. În eșantion au fost incluși și influenceri, pentru a obține o înțelegere mai profundă a utilizării social media. Cercetarea a urmărit câteva teme principale: utilizarea generală a platformelor de social media, reprezentările rolurilor de gen și ale stereotipurilor de gen în mediul online, așteptările legate de gen, precum și impactul rețelelor sociale asupra tinerilor din perspectiva rolurilor și stereotipurilor de gen. Principalele rezultate arată că rețelele sociale conțin o mare varietate de roluri și stereotipuri de gen, însă influența acestora asupra subiecților variază în funcție de gen: femeile resimt o presiune socială mai mare de a se conforma anumitor roluri și stereotipuri de gen, în comparație cu bărbații. Cu toate acestea, rezultatele generale subliniază că, pentru participanții implicați, aceste influențe nu sunt percepute ca fiind covârșitoare.

Cuvinte cheie: social media, stereotipuri de gen, roluri de gen, impactul social media.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to understand how young people acknowledge and perceive gender roles and stereotypes, but also to see their perspective on what is promoted on social media in terms of gender. In the following pages I will present a short literature review of studies and articles about gender roles and stereotypes, their relations with the media and other important sociological concepts, complemented by data from a qualitative study conducted for the bachelor's thesis.

In recent years, social media has become an important source of information for people. Considering the socialization process, social media has a great influence as an agent of socialization, particularly in shaping opinions, attitudes and behaviours, especially among teens. Their identity is increasingly shaped by social media through the content published on applications such as Instagram, TikTok or YouTube. The content regarding the way an individual should behave or think based on being a "woman" or "a man" is prominent on social media, and a clear example in this regard is Andrew Tate, known for promoting the "alpha male" style that involves toxic masculinity, sexism and misogyny. Recent studies show that young boys' attitudes are influenced by this kind of 'manfluencer' – "internet personalities who weaponize highly performative and extremist notions of masculinity, and who promote regressive, sexist ideas about women" (Wescott, Roberts & Zhao, 2024, pp. 167-168). This study reveals that 30 women who work as teachers in public and private Australian schools have

reported that boys tend to have more sexist and misogynist behaviours towards them or other girl students if they watch 'manfluencers' like Andrew Tate.

Moreover, gender has become a major word that can be interpreted as having a pejorative meaning and used as an "ideological weapon" for children's wellbeing (Pandea, Grzmeny & Keen, 2020). A similar view was also used as a premise in Romania, in 2020, to prohibit the "gender ideology" in Romanian schools and universities, but the law proposed by some members of the Parliament was not validated by the president.

2. Sociological concepts

The following section includes definitions of the key concepts used to support the study, and one of the concepts is that of role. Rodat (2017) explains that roles, especially gender roles, are determined by socialization and by the individual as a "social actor". Primary socialization is an important factor since an individual does assimilate pivotal norms and values during this stage of the socialization process. Therefore, individuals can find certain roles to be "normal," such as how gender roles are presented in the society – as roles performed by women and roles performed by men – which are considered "natural" (Bourdieu, 2005, apud Rodat, 2017). Gender roles "are different from one culture to another and they refer to those behaviours considered to be appropriate and acceptable for the members of every category of gender (men, respectively women)" (Rodat, 2017, p. 273).

These aspects can easily lead to stereotyping. A stereotype refers to what is thought of a certain category of individuals, based on "stenciled images [...] in the sense that they are not based on direct, recent observation of phenomenon, but on a priori ways of thinking" (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1998, p. 603). Rodat (2017) highlights two components of stereotypes: descriptive – attitudes and behaviours that men and women should have –, and prescriptive – rules, norms, traditional values regarding men and women from the perspective of gender.

2.1. Sex vs. Gender

The second wave of feminism helped to clarify the conceptual differences between sex and gender (Dragomir & Miroiu, 2002), with these concepts being defined in numerous ways. According to Giddens (2010), sex is defined as anatomical and physiological differences which define a man's and a woman's body", while gender is defined as "psychological, social and cultural differences between men and women that are socially constructed" (p. 438); therefore, a person's gender can be different from their sex.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has a similar view and defines sex as the biological and physiological characteristics that differentiate males from females, "such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, etc.", while gender refers to "the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men" (Council of Europe, n.d.).

However, The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines these concepts in a much extended way, saying that sex "refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define humans as female or male" and that "these sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who possess both, but these characteristics tend to differentiate humans as females or males" (EIGE, n.d.). Gender refers to "the social attributes and opportunities associated with being female and male" (EIGE, n.d.) and to the relationships between people, these being socially constructed and learned through socialization. Therefore, gender determines how men and women should behave, hence the inequalities faced in most societies (opportunities, access to resources, activities and responsibilities undertaken by men and women). EIGE also mentions gender being only a criterion for broader analysis, other criteria being socio-cultural status, ethnicity, race, age etc., thus it is also brought to attention the intersectional component.

Gender can be *practiced* in different ways, from one culture to another, as it has been shown since the earliest studies. For example, Margaret Mead (1935) compares three primitive societies – Arapesh, Mundugumor, and Tchambuli – where men and women do not have the traditionally assigned roles. The Arapesh men and women show 'maternal' and 'feminine' traits, while the Mundugumor men and women show traits that are rather 'aggressive'; the Tchambuli men and women have 'reversed' roles, where women are the 'dominant' partners and men are the 'emotionally dependent' partners (Mead, 1935, p. 38). Therefore, Mead tries to explain that these traits, norms, values etc. are determined by the culture of a society, not by biological factors. Giddens (2010) also explains that most differences between men and women do not come from biology, and for that reason many researchers tried to study gender roles and gender identity through theories of learning.

In addition, it cannot be denied that social norms and societal values impose that gender is binary - masculine and feminine - ignoring those who do not identify as either. Traditionally, as it was also shown earlier, gender determines inequality which usually affects women (Pandea, Grzemny & Keen, 2020, p. 35). "Therefore, women's inferiority is not natural, it derives from this hierarchical binarism invented by the patriarchy with the aim of promoting masculine authority" (Dragomir & Miroiu, 2002, p. 157).

With regard to gender as a social construct, Pandea, Grzemny and Keen (2020) introduce the concept of *gender awareness*: how an individual sees themselves or those around them. Usually, as shown before, gender tends to be categorised in masculine and feminine, although it is more complex. Additionally, the authors emphasize on the fact that gender can be expressed both consciously and unconsciously (Pandea, Grzemny & Keen, 2020).

2.2. Doing gender

West & Zimmerman (1987) came up with the concept of 'doing gender', which refers to gender as a 'routine': practicing gender through systematic and

methodical activities that are either masculine or feminine (p. 126). Every individual practice gender by wearing certain clothes, behaving in specific ways or having traits associated with a particular sex category. Individuals give meaning to sex and gender; therefore, these can be understood as socially constructed concepts (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Critics of this perspective, such as Judith Butler, do not agree completely because of the masculine-feminine binarity that the article highlights and suggests the term of 'undoing gender'. Others believe that studies should diminish gender differences, not enhance the differences regarding how men and women react in social situations (Rodat, 2017). West and Zimmerman responded saying that 'doing gender' is an ongoing process, and the placing of individuals in a masculine or feminine category represents the social construction of gender. Those who do not identify with any category can be placed in a category of 'repracticing gender' (Rodat, 2017).

2.3. Socialization

Every individual is influenced by attitudes, norms, values of a society, and assimilates those through a process called socialization. Giddens (2010) defines socialization as the process where a child becomes an individual aware of themselves, "well informed and accustomed to the manners of the culture they were born into" (p. 158). This process takes place throughout an individual's entire life, influenced by various agents of socialization, such as family, peer groups, school, and mass media.

Theories of cultural influence suggest that socialization is the most important factor behind differences between the sexes. If biology would have been the core of these differences, all societies should have been the same (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1998). However, as highlighted earlier in Margaret Mead's article (1935), culture plays a key role in determining gender roles.

Giddens draws attention to the fact that functionalists favoured the theory of gender socialization, where boys and girls learn gender roles through "positive or negative sanctions, applied social forces which rewards or restrain the behaviour" (2010, p. 439). In this way, children learn roles that align with their biological sex – otherwise, they may be considered deviants. Hence, agents of socialization are expected to maintain the social order regarding how individuals perform gender roles (Giddens, 2010).

2.4. Mass media and social media

Mass media is an agent of socialization that has become increasingly important, especially with the rise of the Internet. Wood (1994) shows that mass media perpetuates a distorted vision of men and women through various gender stereotypes. It is necessary to examine how gender stereotypes have been perpetuated over the years to understand the importance of social media, and for this reason, a few examples from the traditional media will be described. For example, the stereotype that girls/women are not good at mathematics was

perpetuated even by the company that produced the Barbie doll: in 1992, Mattel released a talking doll that said phrases about how difficult mathematics classes are (*Mattel Offers Trade-In,* 1992, apud Wood, 1994, p. 33).

Television series promoted men as serious, confident, strong, and smart, while other movies from that time reinforced the idea of 'extreme masculinity', portraying men as sexually aggressive, violent, and independent (Wood, 1994, p. 32). Furthermore, Grünberg (2005) analyses three Romanian news television channels and observes differences in how men and women were portrayed at the beginning of the 2000s: women were usually represented as victims of domestic violence (38%), dependent on men (30%), and as mothers (8%); men were represented as aggressors (3%), leaders (31%) or head of family (18%) (p. 69).

Wood (1994, p. 35) also reveals other gender stereotypes presented in the media, such as the man who always saves the woman from danger - for example, the story of "Sleeping Beauty" -, or the woman who tries to clean but Mr. Clean comes to help her with a cleaning product. Additionally, there is the stereotype of the woman being responsible for domestic chores, while the man is the provider. This stereotype can be seen also in the Romanian society, and The National Institute of Statistics [INS] shows that in 2020, among the inactive population aged 20 to 64 years who manage domestic chores in the household, 39,1 percent were women, while only 3,1 percent were men (INS, 2021). Therefore, it can be well observed that there are still significant differences in how domestic chores are shared within households, leading to inequality.

The relationships between men and women are deeply stereotypical as well. Wood (1994) brings to attention another well-known story for children – "Little Mermaid", where Ariel abandons her identity to be with the prince. Mass media, especially in the 80s, in response to the feminist movement, continued to promote traditional gender roles where women were mostly secondary characters despite the movie genre (Wood, 1994, p. 34).

Social media platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok, work in the same manner as traditional media and have the potential to influence users' behaviour, cultural standards or other norms. Therefore, social media can promote 'social comparison' which involves preoccupation with someone's physical aspect (Santoniccolo et al, 2023, p. 7). Women are more predisposed to sexualization and objectification, whereas men are less affected, as revealed by Santoniccolo, Trombetta, Paradiso and Rollè (2023).

Social media also promotes many of these gender roles and stereotypes. One study shows that selfies uploaded on Instagram can contain even more gender stereotypes in terms of how individuals express themselves in the pictures: females were more likely "to emulate the more traditionally feminine ideals" (Döring, Reif, & Poeschl, 2016, apud. Fernandez & Menon, 2022. p. 124). Another study involving a sample of 797 adolescents who use Facebook (429 females), aged 12 to 17, from Spain, shows that the participants tend not to present themselves in a gender-stereotypical way on the social media platform (Oberst, Renau, Chamarro & Carbonell, 2016), However, this tendency is more pronounced among females.

In the following pages I will extend the discussion regarding the impact of social media on gender stereotypes and gender roles representation with data from the study that I conducted for my bachelor's thesis. I will shortly describe the methodology used for my research and I will explain the main results.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research-gap

Although some studies emphasised the influence of social media in perpetuating gender stereotypes and roles, this area still requires further attention, particularly since teens tend to use social media platforms from a young age. This means that they are susceptible to internalizing those gender stereotypes and roles, which will later transpose into their adult life through socialization. This process can also be accelerated by content creators *(influencers)* who perpetuate these gender stereotypes and roles, whether consciously or unconsciously. Moreover, as it will also be shown in the following pages, social media represents most of the time only men and women, which strengthens the concept of gender as binary.

Unfortunately, research on this subject often lacks an intersectional perspective, which would provide a more in-depth perspective of the matter – for example, to see how white heterosexual people – considered 'the norm' – experience gender stereotypes and roles compared to Roma people who are a part of the LGBTQAI+ community. This is only one example, but it is important to emphasize that there could be nuances when we take into consideration multiple aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality etc., and the system in which these interact, which is why it is important to have a comprehensive approach into this phenomenon. The study did not fully explore this subject at the time of research, but nonetheless it is a phenomenon that needed to be addressed. Therefore, such a study is useful to, at least, fill in some gaps in this area of research and set the framework for future research.

3.2. Objectives

The general objective is to explore in depth how gender roles and stereotypes on social media influence young people's attitudes and behaviours. More specific objectives include:

1. To determine which social media platforms are most frequently used by young people and assess their impact.
2. To identify the traditional gender roles and stereotypes present on social media platforms.
3. To analyse the effects of gender stereotypes on social media platforms on young people/users.
4. To analyse the effects of gender roles present on social media platforms on young people's behaviour, values and attitudes.

3.3. Research questions

1. What types of gender stereotypes and roles are promoted on social media, and what are the effects on young people?
2. How do social media platforms influence the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and roles?

3.4. Sample

A qualitative research method was adopted, using a semi-structured interview guide to collect data. The sample consisted of ten participants, five males and five females, aged between 20 and 27 years, that are frequent social media users. Therefore, it was more likely to obtain a relevant opinion regarding social media influence on gender roles and stereotypes. Residence was not considered a relevant factor in this study. The inclusion of content creators in the sample provided a broader perspective on the issue.

The interviews were conducted between March and May 2024, both online - via Discord and Zoom, and in person. Participants gave their consent to participate in the interviews and to have them recorded. Participants were informed that their responses would be anonymised. On average, each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Table 1. List of respondents who participated at interviews

Subject code	Gender	Age	Occupation	Level of education (completed)	Interview duration
S1	Male	22 years old	Student	Upper-secondary education (High-school degree)	56 minutes
S2	Female	24 years old	HR	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	59 minutes
S3	Male	25 years old	IT	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	56 minutes
S4	Female	21 years old	Student	Upper-secondary education (High-school degree)	59 minutes
S5	Female	22 years old	Assistant manager	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	79 minutes
S6	Male	22 years old	Call center	Upper-secondary education (High-school degree)	45 minutes
S7	Male	25 years old	Marketing, content creator	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	70 minutes
S8	Male	27 years old	Technical analyst, content creator, comediant	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	87 minutes
S9	Female	26 years old	NGO coordinator	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	55 minutes
S10	Female	21 years old	Student	Upper-secondary education (High-school degree)	58 minutes

Source: created by the author

4. Results

4.1. Social media usage and impact

In terms of social media usage, it was found that out of ten respondents, five use social media primarily in a passive manner, which means that they either do not post content on those platforms or do so very infrequently:

"I do not post anything or I post very rarely, I am not very active on social media from this point of view" (S3, M, 25 years old).

The other five respondents answered that they are active users, regularly posting pictures, videos or other content. Two of them are content creators on YouTube, which means that they are very active. S8 (M, 27 years old) shares not only YouTube videos, but also reels (on Instagram), along with photographs of his YouTube content or his stand-up events. S7 (M, 25 years old) states:

"Generally, especially because of my job, I must be online, and I had to be online in the last ten years (...) as of implication... yes. I like to participate in anything that involves debate in general on social media."

Based on respondents' answers, it was determined that the dominant functions of social media are entertainment and communication, while the informational function was mentioned by only two respondents. The entertainment function can be accomplished through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, and the communication function is commonly facilitated through Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

Moreover, the respondents were also asked about what social media platforms they use and how frequently. All respondents answered that they use Instagram daily, therefore the relevance of this platform can be deduced as being highly important. In addition, TikTok is also a widely used platform among the study participants. According to the respondents, the same trend applies to the younger generations, in general, emphasizing that this happens because the platforms are popular and easy to use. Through Instagram, for example, it is easier to interact with other people and with influencers that tend to post frequently. The same can be said about TikTok, which also has a very engaging way of being used through its short-clips format. However, Facebook is less popular among them, as it is primarily used by older generations.

The impact of social media can have both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspects imply better communication between people from different places, but it can also be a place where individuals are more likely to critique and express hateful comments since it can be easier to hide someone's identity. Moreover, the time spent on these platforms can also have a significant impact: for example, on average, the respondents spend at least three hours per day on social media. Another important aspect is socialization.

As mentioned earlier, social media is an indispensable influence in socialization the process, since it is a mean of forming opinions, attitudes, and other behaviours of people from a very young age:

> *"There were debates about women's rights, equality between women and men and I think by participating we all have the chance to reach a common point in regard to sensible subjects, like your thesis."* (S7, M, 25 years old)

> *"Especially when it comes to talking about people who, at a certain age, are particularly susceptible to create a certain opinion for them about society, about values... and the sentiments on traditionalism-conservatism, but also regarding progressists, tend to intensify."* (S2, F, 24 years old)

Here, influencers play an important role since they present an image of themselves that can be perceived as astonishing. Respondents mentioned that young people may imitate or aspire to imitate these influencers, which can be damaging when it comes to shaping an individual's personality. It was also mentioned a pressure to conform to societal standards, which influences the sense of self of individuals and other aspects of everyday life:

> *"It can be bad for adolescents who still have not developed their personality and then they are exposed to this kind of content. And it can affect their self-esteem. This pressure that social media exercises on us, it makes us do obsessive shopping, for example, to buy ourselves clothes or jewellery or to go at salons and do all kinds of procedures"* (S9, F, 26 years old)

4.2. Gender roles and social media

A section of the interview was dedicated to gender roles. Firstly, participants were asked about their perceptions of femininity and masculinity, and it was clear that they identified a division between 'what is feminine' and 'what is masculine' and it was effortless for them to identify associated gender roles:

> *"Femininity and masculinity are not bad things themselves, but we see them as ideals."* (S4, F, 21 years old)

> *"These were put on women, as well as on men. I mean, somehow it seems to me that how we were divided in terms of work division 15.000 years ago, more or less, we remained there. We try to evolve a little, but we are still in this type of work division."* (S2, F, 24 years old)

The respondents described these concepts as harmful, forming barriers and labels for genders and reinforcing traditional gender roles. However, there was a respondent that implied that there are certain roles that can only be performed by either men or women, which encourages those traditional gender roles:

> *"For example, in construction firms, the people who actually do the physical work on the site are mostly men, simply because men have greater physical strength and endurance, a physiological built that helps in this regard. On the*

other hand, women are very good in the HR department, being very good in communication and interpersonal relationships." (S1, M, 22 years old)

Some respondents indicated that there has been some improvement in terms of how traditional gender roles are perpetuated in the society, therefore they do not count as much in how an individual should behave solely on their gender:

"It seems to me that the differences are starting to fade. More masculine or feminine behaviours are starting to be accepted across different sex and gender categories." (S4, F, 21 years old)

"Recently I noticed that people are not that narrow-minded anymore and does not say anymore that for you to be feminine, for example, you have to wear heels or a dress or I don't know" (S10, F, 21 years old).

Secondly, the social media content related to gender roles can be divided into two categories; the content that promotes traditional gender roles and the content that rejects these roles. The respondents answered that the content that rejects traditional gender roles exists, but it is not as popular. The first category, from the respondents' perspective, can influence teenagers especially because it promotes grandiose lifestyles or behaviours that people should adopt 'because they are a man/woman".

"So, in terms of social media content, I think the content that reinforces gender roles is very strong. And I would say it particularizes them in a way that makes them even more toxic than they were before." (S8, M, 27 years old)

'It appeared to me on TikTok all sorts of influencers, micro-influencers mostly, because they didn't have many followers, that worked with this stuff. They were teaching you how to be feminine, how to behave in a certain context, you must do that, you have to do the other, how to do make-up... And the same, men that were giving advice, how to be a man, like to go to the gym and make money." (S10, F, 21 years old)

This reinforces the socialization function that social media holds for young people in general, where they are taught women must be gentle, delicate, well-arranged, and men are expected to be strong, avoid wearing makeup, are refrain from having 'a feminine look':

"The man must be as serious as possible, not to do make-up or to dress, I don't know, in a feminine style. The woman should be as cute as possible, to talk on a nice tone, to be endearing, with a sweet attitude." (S6, M, 22 years old)

"These roles and standards that we have look tidy, to be good looking, perfect nails, to go to the gym or do sport or be on a diet to be slim, but at the same time curvy. And the men to be all worked up at the gym and to be big." (S9, F, 26 years old)

A few interesting details mentioned by some respondents deserve to be highlighted due to their significance. Four respondents discussed the concept of

'toxic feminism', defined as how "some women tend to go to an extreme where they want too much, are aggressive and want to be above men"; the other six participants did not mention this aspect.

> "The women that take feminism to a very aggressive extreme against men, and they try not to be equal to men, but above them." (S1, M, 22 years old)

> "I appreciate that women want their rights, but at the same time, I don't agree with toxic feminism. In which they want... I don't know... They want too much..." (S5, F, 21 years old)

Another type of content that promotes traditional gender roles involves discussions of 'masculine energies' and 'feminine energies'. Three respondents brought into attention this aspect and said that these terms essentially reinforce the idea that women should handle domestic work and focus on their appearance, while men are expected to provide resources and be assertive—particularly when interacting with women (as women should never be the assertive ones):

> "It is also to categorize genders, where the woman has to do domestic work while the man brings in resources in order to be in their energies." (S2, F, 24 years old)

> "Social media also promotes this idea of being in your feminine energy or in your masculine energy, where the woman wants the man to be assertive and have initiative because you have to be in your feminine energy." (S9, F, 26 years old)

4.3. Gender stereotypes and social media

The respondents also identified numerous stereotypes about men and women, many of which align with the gender roles mentioned earlier. The gender stereotypes about women, in the respondents' perspective, are the following: to be a caretaker of the home and family, to be sensitive, delicate, considerate, and to refrain from having multiple sexual partners. One participant summarised these views with a clear example:

> "... and you have the Barbie doll that cleans up because it gives you all these cleaning supplies, and the Barbie doll which is in a kitchen and cooks, the Barbie doll that has a baby and the Barbie doll that... and in a way all these roles of the Barbie doll are, actually, stereotypes and patriarchal roles" (S9, F, 26 years old).

Gender stereotypes about men include owning a car, being a leader (in the family), providing for the woman or the family, displaying physical strength – often by going to the gym - and avoiding the expression of emotions. Therefore, it can be said that men should emanate power both physically and socially, while women are expected to remain passive.

The respondents were also asked about social media trends, and four of them mentioned Andrew Tate, an influencer known for his controversial opinions

on masculinity, women, and feminism, view that are characterized by sexism and misogyny.

> *"This movement was assimilated by the incel community, involuntary celibates, which began blaming progressive and feminist movements for their own behaviours and attitudes. Tate perpetuates the most toxic side of gender roles, but these types of movement are not as common in recent years"* (S8, M, 27 years old).

They agreed that Tate capitalizes from the vulnerability of individuals with low self-esteem, blaming feminism and 'the woke movement' for their struggles. This results in promoting toxic behaviours and attitudes, such as the perceived necessity of women's subordination to men, which perpetuates traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes.

Another respondent mentioned a trend that was popular at the time on TikTok in Romania, where women used a filter that simulated bruises on their faces and created videos portraying situations such as not having prepared food for their partner, so he was angry when he arrived home and did not find anything on the table. This trend, therefore, served to normalize domestic violence, although it was intended 'as a joke'. The respondents presented only the negative side effects of social media trends; however, two respondents said that trends can also bring positive effects, such as normalizing showing emotions among men.

4.4. General and beauty standards for men and women

When talking about expected standards for men and women, respondents offered many examples. In the case of men, they mentioned that men are expected not to show emotion, to be physically strong, imposing, to have a certain 'manly' way of talking. However, the male respondents noted that they do not necessarily feel obligated to conform to these norms in all situations.

> *"For men it isn't much of an influence... but it is rather promoted the idea that you have nothing if you don't have money."* (S3, M, 25 years old)

> *"We can't talk about the same impact as the one on women... I am pretty privileged and if I don't like something I can reject it without problems."* (S7, M, 25 years old)

In the case of women, these expected standards can be numerous, such as avoiding vulgar language, being delicate, sensible, calm, accepting, and respect everyone even in situations where they are not shown respect. Physical appearance is very important in women's case: they are expected not to have body hair, to wear clothes that are neither too revealing nor 'too boy-ish' (at the same time they must be careful when going out in certain clothes), and not to eat too much, as it might negatively affect their appearances.

Lastly, respondents were asked about beauty standards for men and women, and their impact. Some of the responses that highlight the effect these standards have - even on the respondents themselves - are as follows:

"In the back of my mind, they stay there… Because you grow up with them, you interact with them, when you're on social media, or when you are with your friends and they make a joke about these stereotypes and you laugh in that moment maybe, but after that you remain with them and maybe them too" (S10, F, 21 years old);

All respondents agreed that the standards present on social media are unrealistic and can transpose in everyday life. Five respondents mentioned the fact that people are likely to post pictures that highlight their physical qualities, showing themselves 'from the best side'.

"On social media you have to have the best pictures from the best angle" (S8, M, 27 years old).

In the case of men, the respondents are equally divided into two categories: five believe that men are affected by unrealistic beauty standards to the same extent as women, while the other five believe that men are less affected by these standards. However, the latter category mentioned that men are rather affected by other aspects, such as the desire to achieve a high social status through material possessions. At the same time, men are expected to maintain a certain appearance that denotes success, whether through clothing, expensive cars, multiple female partners, or even going to the gym: *"the perfect man that works out, has a four-pack, is 1.90 meters, has beard, nice hair"* (S2, F, 24 years old).

5. Conclusions

All participants in the study use social media platforms frequently, especially Instagram and TikTok, primarily for entertainment and communication purposes. The informative function was mentioned less frequently, although some respondents noted that they follow content related to national and international social events. Social media has a great impact in the socialization process, as it allows users to easily interact and share opinions, ideas, and attitudes. Influencers also have substantial impact within this process.

From the respondents' perspective, gender roles limit men and women from engaging in activities typically associated with the opposite gender. These can be seen in the division of labour or in general expectations placed on individuals based on their gender. However, the interviews reveal that all respondents think of gender from a binary perspective, although not all of them believe that gender is necessarily binary. They identified on social media various traditional gender roles and stereotypes, including through influencers. Gender stereotypes for females seem to be more present on social media, therefore respondents claim that women are more likely to feel pressured to conform to traditional norms. For men, not conforming to those traditional norms does not determine significant consequences.

To conclude, the limitations of the research must be acknowledged: the small number of participants and their specific profiles, being of interest for the

future to develop the sample and use a larger number of participants from a vast variety of socio-professional categories. In this sense, I believe a more intersectional perspective can be used to better represent more categories of individuals and see how gender interacts outside the masculine-feminine binarity, and with other identity elements (ethnicity, race, nationality, age, disability etc.).

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KURDISH WOMEN: AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE FIGHT FOR IDENTITY, LIBERATION, AND EQUALITY

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Abstract: This study explores the transformative role of Kurdish women as both political actors and armed combatants in the struggle for gender equality, national identity, and liberation. Following the establishment of a no-fly zone over Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991, some Kurdish women's organizations began to assert political demands for gender equality alongside national autonomy, which opened space for political activism and rights advocacy. The ideological shift introduced by Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the PKK, through concepts such as *jineolojî* and democratic confederalism, redefined women's roles from private to public, militarized, and politically empowered spheres. Organizations like the YPJ (Women's Protection Units) embody this shift, blending military resistance with social revolution. The war against the Islamic State further amplified their global visibility, though Western narratives often overlook the deeply political and anti-patriarchal motivations underpinning their participation. Women's emancipation is central – not incidental – to the Kurdish revolutionary project, challenging both liberal feminist and anti-militarist paradigms. Despite persistent cultural conservatism and systemic violence, Kurdish women continue to reshape norms by linking feminist struggle with national liberation. Their engagement questions dominant models of statehood, identity, and gender, offering a radical alternative rooted in both armed resistance and ideological transformation.

Keywords: Kurdish women, jineolojî, gender equality, democratic confederalism, PKK, YPJ (Women's Protection Units), patriarchy, national liberation.

Résumé : Cette étude explore le rôle transformateur des femmes kurdes en tant qu'acteurs politiques et combattantes armées dans la lutte pour l'égalité des genres, l'identité nationale et la libération. Historiquement marginalisées au sein des cadres patriarcaux et tribaux, les femmes kurdes ont de plus en plus affirmé leur autonomie, notamment après l'établissement d'une zone d'exclusion aérienne au Kurdistan irakien en 1991, qui a ouvert un espace pour l'activisme politique et la défense des droits. Le changement idéologique introduit par Abdullah Öcalan, fondateur du PKK, à travers des concepts tels que le jineolojî et le confédéralisme démocratique, a redéfini les rôles des femmes, les faisant passer de sphères privées à des sphères publiques, militarisées et politiquement autonomes. Des organisations comme les YPJ (Unités de Protection des Femmes) incarnent ce changement, alliant résistance militaire et révolution sociale. La guerre contre l'EI a amplifié leur visibilité mondiale, bien que les récits occidentaux négligent souvent les motivations profondément politiques et anti-patriarcales qui sous-tendent leur participation.

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L'émancipation des femmes est au cœur – et non accessoire – du projet révolutionnaire kurde, remettant en question à la fois les paradigmes féministes libéraux et antimilitaristes. Malgré un conservatisme culturel persistant et une violence systémique, les femmes kurdes continuent de redéfinir les normes en liant lutte féministe et libération nationale. Leur engagement interroge les modèles dominants d'État, d'identité et de genre, offrant une alternative radicale ancrée à la fois dans la résistance armée et la transformation idéologique.

Mots-clés : Femmes kurdes, jineolojî, égalité des sexes, confédéralisme démocratique, PKK, YPJ (Unités de protection des femmes), patriarcat, libération nationale.

Rezumat

Această lucrare explorează rolul transformator al femeilor kurde ca actori politici și combatante armate în lupta pentru egalitatea de gen, identitatea națională și eliberare. Istoric marginalizate în cadrul structurilor patriarhale și tribale, femeile kurde și-au afirmat din ce în ce mai mult autonomia, în special după stabilirea unei zone de excludere aeriană asupra Kurdistanului irakian în 1991, care a deschis un spațiu pentru activismul politic și advocacy-ul drepturilor acestora. Schimbarea ideologică introdusă de Abdullah Öcalan, fondatorul PKK, prin concepte precum jineolojî și confederalismul democratic, a redefinit rolurile femeilor de la sfere private la sfere publice, militarizate și politice. Organizații precum YPJ (Unitățile de Protecție a Femeilor) întruchipează această schimbare, îmbinând rezistența militară cu revoluția socială. Războiul împotriva Statului Islamic a amplificat vizibilitatea lor globală, deși narațiunile occidentale trec adesea cu vederea motivațiile profund politice și anti-patriarhale care stau la baza participării lor. Emanciparea femeilor este centrală – și nu incidentală – în proiectul revoluționar kurd, provocând atât paradigmele feministe liberale, cât și cele antimilitariste. În ciuda conservatorismului cultural persistent și a violenței sistemice, femeile kurde continuă să redefinească normele prin legătura dintre lupta feministă și eliberarea națională. Angajamentul lor pune sub semnul întrebării modelele dominante de stat, identitate și gen, oferind o alternativă radicală bazată atât pe rezistența armată, cât și pe transformarea ideologică. (Română)

Cuvinte-cheie: Femei kurde, jineolojî, egalitate de gen, confederalism democratic, PKK, YPJ (Unitățile de protecție ale femeilor), patriarhat, eliberare națională.

1. Historical and Socio-Political Context

While traditionally constrained by patriarchal norms within Kurdish tribal societies, Kurdish women have, particularly from the mid-20th century onward, played increasingly prominent roles in political and military movements. Their participation has ranged from involvement in guerrilla warfare – most notably within organizations like the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – to leadership in civil society and grassroots mobilization, reflecting a complex and evolving dynamic of gender, nationalism, and resistance. Available evidence suggests that prior to 1991, documented Kurdish women's political activities primarily addressed national autonomy, with explicit gender equality demands emerging more prominently in the post-Gulf War period. Moreover, before 1991, Kurdish women like Leyla Qasim, a Kurdish activist, and early PKK members engaged primarily in nationalist movements with little explicit focus on gender. The establishment of a

„no-fly zone" over Iraqi Kurdistan, supported by the international community after the Gulf War, created new space for women's mobilization.

Furthermore, post-1991, following the Gulf War and the emergence of the Kurdistan Regional Government, women's organizations such as the Kurdistan Women's Union began foregrounding legal reform and gender rights, thereby enabling Kurdish women to articulate specific demands for political participation and access to education. This shift effectively marked a transition from participation in national liberation of the Kurdish women to articulating autonomous feminist agendas within Kurdish political structures. Kaya (2017) argues that despite progressive legislation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, implementation is hindered by patriarchal judicial structures and lack of political will.

As such, Kaya (2017) discusses the legislative advancements in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, such as the amendment of the Iraqi Personal Status Law, which is a legal framework that governs matters related to family law, and the introduction of the Law against Domestic Violence in 2011, enacted by the Kurdistan Regional Government to address and combat domestic violence within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Kaya (2017) observes that "*male judges, who do not always fully implement the new laws, govern most courts,*" and that "*the judiciary's partiality and the government's lack of interest wear down the spirit of campaigners.*" These observations underscore the gap between legislative reforms and their practical enforcement, compounded by entrenched patriarchal norms within the judicial system.

While the emergence of Goran initially energized Kurdish women's activism by challenging traditional parties and advocating for feminist issues, several scholars argue that the movement's transition into formal politics compromised its reformist potential. Al-Ali and Pratt (2011) highlight that Goran's entry into government structures diluted its impact on advancing women's rights, leading to tensions between activists inside and outside the political system. Similarly, Saleem and Skelton (2019) note that Goran's integration into the Kurdistan Regional Government exposed it to co-optation by dominant parties like the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), undermining its ability to challenge existing clientelistic networks. Abdullah Azeez (2018) critiques Goran for failing to deliver on its promises, describing it as a party that shifted from reformist rhetoric to conventional politics, which alienated many supporters, including feminist activists.

Mufid (2016) further emphasizes this decline, documenting how Goran lost its innovative edge as it became entangled with established power structures, weakening its challenge to patriarchal norms and tribal influences. While some women – particularly those close to the KDP and PUK – believe these parties have contributed to improving women's rights gender equality policies often remain symbolic. Although women have become more visible in the public sphere, this does not necessarily translate into tangible improvements in their living conditions. Activists emphasize that, despite political advances, laws against violence toward women are inadequately enforced, and domestic violence and

honor killings, which continue to be documented by human rights organizations are frequently treated as private family matters rather than civil law issues. This reflects a systemic failure to protect women's rights in Iraqi Kurdistan (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011, p. 346).

Since the 1980s, many Kurds have taken up arms in defense of their people's aspirations for statehood. This nationalist resistance has also offered a platform for women's emancipation, particularly within the Kurdish freedom movement. During the Syrian Civil War and the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS/Daesh), Kurdish women fighters emerged as powerful symbols of both military resistance and gender liberation. The prominence of figures such as Asiya Abdellah, co-president of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and Nassrin Abdalla, commander of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), especially after their 2015 visit to the Élysée Palace, helped project an image of Kurdish female fighters as defenders of progressive values against jihadist extremism (Tank, 2017, pp. 405-408).

However, the broader socio-political conditions that facilitated women's prominent roles in this armed struggle remain underexplored. The Rojava experiment in Northern Syria, rooted in democratic confederalism and influenced by Abdullah Öcalan's feminist ideology, created a unique environment where gender equality was positioned as central to political transformation (Tank & Baser, 2016). As Sayegh (2020) notes, Kurdish women in Rojava were not merely symbolic participants but active agents in redefining power structures, contributing to governance, education, and security.

Periferias (2025) emphasizes that this movement for women's emancipation was deeply interwoven with the broader Kurdish struggle for autonomy and was not simply a product of wartime necessity. Rather, the war provided an opportunity for an already existing ideological commitment to gender equality to manifest in practical, visible ways. Shahvisi and Sayegh (2020) also argue that the Western fascination with Kurdish women fighters often simplifies the depth of their struggle, reducing it to spectacle while ignoring the long-term feminist organizing and the ideological roots underpinning their involvement.

2. The Apoist doctrine

Kurdish political organizations in Syria and Turkey belong mainly to the so-called "Apoist" movement. These organizations adopt the political theories of Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the PKK, who developed concepts of democratic confederalism that the PYD has attempted to implement in Rojava. A fundamental component of his doctrine is the term jineolojî. This term which is often described as the "science of women" within the Kurdish women's movement, is a neologism that does not originate from classical Kurdish linguistic roots. Instead, it combines the Kurdish word jin (meaning "woman") with the Greek term logos (meaning "reason," "word," or "science") – a deliberate synthesis intended to reframe knowledge production from a feminist and decolonial perspective (Käser, 2020). This linguistic construction underscores the ideological ambition behind jineolojî:

to create a transformative epistemology rooted in women's experiences, but global in its critique of patriarchal systems.

As articulated by the Jineoloji Committee Europe (2018), the creation of jineolojî was part of Abdullah Öcalan's broader intellectual project to challenge positivist, patriarchal, and Western-centric social sciences. Rather than relying on Western feminist theory alone, jineolojî aims to localize and universalize knowledge by re-anchoring it in Kurdish revolutionary practice while adopting critical tools from broader intellectual traditions, including Greek philosophy (Periferias, 2025).

Shahvisi and Sayegh (2020) emphasize that jineolojî is not just a theoretical innovation but also a lived political strategy in Rojava, where it informs education, governance, and grassroots organizing. In this context, the hybrid etymology of the term mirrors the hybrid nature of its political praxis—combining indigenous, feminist, and revolutionary knowledge systems. Tank and Baser (2016) further note that this intellectual project serves not only to empower Kurdish women but also to resist dominant narratives imposed by colonial or state-centric knowledge structures.

In essence, the term jineolojî has become a conceptual and symbolic foundation of the Kurdish women's movement, representing its broader ideological commitment to women's liberation. Far from being limited to feminist theory as developed in Western academia, jineolojî is deeply embedded in the Kurdish sociopolitical context and aims to construct new epistemologies rooted in women's lived experiences and collective struggle (Käser, 2020). This ideology fundamentally rejects gender hierarchy, arguing that women should not be confined to domestic or reproductive roles but are entitled to equal participation in the political, military, and social spheres (Jineoloji Committee Europe, 2018).

Drawing on the critique of gendered public/private divisions common in feminist sociology, jineolojî opposes the traditional confinement of women to the private sphere – a domain historically associated with unpaid care, household management, and the reproduction of labor (Tank & Baser, 2016). Instead, it advocates for women's full and visible engagement in the public sphere, particularly through direct participation in political decision-making and military defense.

This ideological vision has been operationalized by Apoist political organizations such as the PKK and PYD, which actively train women as political leaders, commanders, and ideological educators. These organizations emphasize the formation of the "free woman" (jinê azad) – a liberated political subject no longer subordinate to patriarchal norms (Periferias, 2025). Through institutions like the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and gender co-leadership structures in Rojava, the Kurdish women's movement has embedded feminist principles in political praxis (Shahvisi & Sayegh, 2020). This has allowed women not only to participate in but to reshape the political and military spheres that traditionally excluded them.

3. Women in the PKK and PYD

The PKK welcomed women into its armed forces as early as the 1980s. According to Marcus (2007), an international journalist who studied the PKK, noted that by the 1990s, women accounted for around a third of the PKK's strength. In Syria, only two years after the formation of its armed wing, the PYD set up a women's fighting corps, the YPJ, which incorporated several thousand women. The women soldiers of the PKK and PYD are often portrayed as emblematic of a radical reconfiguration of gender roles in Kurdish society. However, their participation is marked by stringent internal codes that reflect both ideological commitments and sociocultural compromises. These women are expected to be highly disciplined militants, deeply devoted to the Kurdish liberation struggle and to the ideological teachings of Abdullah Öcalan. As Marcus (2007) explains, recruits undergo intensive study of Öcalan's theories on gender, nationalism, and personal transformation, which frame their participation not only as military engagement but as a process of political and personal re-education.

In the women's units, camaraderie is strongly cultivated, but romantic or sexual relationships – particularly with men – are explicitly prohibited. These rules serve multiple functions. On one hand, they reflect an austere form of military discipline common to revolutionary movements. On the other, they represent a calculated cultural negotiation with traditional Kurdish society. As Marcus (2007) notes, some researchers interpret these restrictions as a way to ensure that the movement can be entrusted with young women without raising concerns about their "honor." By maintaining a strict code of sexual conduct, the PKK and PYD reassure conservative communities that their daughters are not being morally compromised, even as they break with conventional gender norms through armed struggle and public activism. One such researcher is Vera Eccarius-Kelly, who discusses the dual strategy of the PKK in balancing militant objectives with gender inclusivity. Eccarius-Kelly's work provides insight into how the PKK's gender policies serve both ideological and practical purposes, including ensuring the "honor" of women fighters in the eyes of conservative Kurdish society. Her analysis suggests that the PKK's gender policies are not merely a reflection of military discipline but are also strategically designed to gain societal acceptance and support for women's involvement in the movement.

These measures thus reflect the dual pressures under which Kurdish women militants operate: the internal ideological mandate to reject patriarchal structures, and the external social imperative to maintain collective legitimacy in a deeply honor-based culture (Käser, 2020; Tank & Baser, 2016). What emerges is a unique hybrid of radical feminism and culturally grounded accommodation—one that allows women to participate in revolutionary politics while upholding values recognizable to traditional Kurdish norms.

Although these organizations have developed an ideology favourable to the integration of women fighters, we must not forget the contextual necessities of this choice. For Kurdish organizations in Rojava, for example, it's a question of finding recruits to continue a war that began twelve years ago, claiming many

victims among the combatants. It's also a question of rebalancing the balance of power in the face of more numerous enemies such as the Turkish army, which since 2016 has mobilized more than ten thousand soldiers for each intervention in Syria. For the women fighters themselves, it's a question of not remaining passive in a battle that determines their place in society. This was particularly true during the rise of the Islamic State. By occupying military positions, many women have entered the public sphere in Rojava, leading to a change in mentality regarding the role they can play in society.

4. Emancipation through struggle

It's worth noting that the ideologically apoist PYD has taken numerous measures in favor of gender equality since the establishment of an autonomous region, such as the co-presidency by a man and a woman of all political decision-making bodies. It is likely, however, that the PYD's egalitarian vision will spread throughout the entire population of Rojava thanks to the commitment of women fighters. Numerous sociological surveys and reports by journalists report a growing acceptance among female soldiers' families of their commitment, even though it runs counter to traditions that confine women to the private sphere of the home. Survivors of conflict zones, particularly within the Yazidi community, have expressed a notable shift in how they perceive women's societal roles – especially after being liberated by the YPJ during the fight against the Islamic State. The YPJ's role in rescuing Yazidi women and children from mass enslavement and genocide has not only had practical humanitarian implications but has also altered cultural attitudes toward gender. Testimonies from Yazidi survivors suggest that female fighters are no longer viewed simply as passive victims or caretakers but as agents of justice and protectors of the community (Periferias, 2025; Käser, 2020).

This transformation in perception is particularly powerful given the deeply patriarchal structure of both Yazidi and broader Kurdish societies, where women's participation in armed struggle was traditionally taboo. The direct involvement of women in acts of resistance, protection, and post-conflict rebuilding has redefined their social identity from that of dependents to active citizens. As Shahvisi and Sayegh (2020) emphasize, these moments of rupture created by conflict – and the ideological leadership of the Kurdish women's movement – enabled survivors to reconceptualize the role of women as central to societal regeneration, justice, and self-determination.

Furthermore, Käser (2020) notes that in interviews and fieldwork, survivors often spoke with admiration and respect about YPJ fighters, referring to them not only as liberators but as moral exemplars. In many cases, the image of the „female liberator" challenged longstanding ideas about honor and gender by associating women with bravery, sacrifice, and leadership. This ideological shift, supported by the jineolojî framework, represents one of the more enduring social impacts of the Kurdish women's movement beyond the battlefield. It is still too early to measure the lasting effects of integrating Kurdish women into the public sphere through military involvement. However, the current experience of a mixed

army and, more generally, of a mixed political structure, seems to be rolling back the deep-rooted prejudices of a gendered division of society that excludes women from public life.

According to Tank (2017), a specialist in the region, it was against the backdrop of the Turkish state's repression and widespread imprisonment of Kurdish men that Kurdish women became politicized, first taking on the role of ardent defenders of their communities, and then in recent years becoming involved in the YPJ. At the same time, the ideology underpinning Turkish activism has changed significantly in the years since Öcalan's arrest, evolving from Marxism-Leninism to a radically different political theory based on three fundamental principles: democratic foundations, ecology and women's emancipation. Indeed, the evolution in revolutionary thought that took place following Öcalan's imprisonment not only tolerates but exalts and defends women's political participation. Building on the notion of the social contract, Öcalan's concept of democratic confederalism privileges the community as the primary political entity, reducing state centralism in favor of direct or "bottom-up" governance (Tank, 2017, pp. 407-408). But fundamentally, Öcalan's many writings also expound the theory that capitalist and state oppression emerges with the establishment of patriarchy and the ensuing enslavement of women (Tank, 2017, p. 410).

In a chapter entitled "The revolution is feminine", Öcalan begins by saying that "no social group has been as physically and psychologically exploited as women" (Öcalan, 2010, p.1). Tracing the history of patriarchy over the past 5.000 years, from ancient Mesopotamia to today's capitalist system, Öcalan proposes a historical narrative linking patriarchy to state formation over 5.000 years, drawing on archaeological interpretations that remain contested among scholars, and promotes the abolition of gender hierarchy as one of the fundamental pillars of Kurdish liberation politics (Öcalan and Happel, 2011, p. 20).

From the perspective of the Kurdish women's movement, feminism is not merely a struggle for gender equality within existing systems but a foundational critique of civilization itself. As Al-Ali and Käser (2020) argue, it represents "the uprising of the oldest colony" – a radical notion that views the historical subjugation of women as the original form of oppression, preceding and enabling the emergence of hierarchical structures such as the state, class society, and capitalism. Within this ideological framework, patriarchy is not one oppression among many, but the root from which all others emerge.

This analysis draws directly from Abdullah Öcalan's ideological writings, where he places the subordination of women at the center of his critique of power and domination. He argues that without dismantling patriarchy, it is impossible to achieve liberation from capitalism or authoritarianism, since these systems are built upon and perpetuate gendered inequality (Jineoloji Committee Europe, 2018). Feminism, then, becomes a revolutionary act – not only for women but for society as a whole.

This idea is elaborated through the theory of jineolojî, which reframes women's history and knowledge as the suppressed foundation of human

civilization. Käser (2020) emphasizes that jineolojî is not an accessory to class struggle or nationalism but a guiding political philosophy that challenges the entire architecture of modern oppression, from militarism to market logic. It is through this lens that feminism is elevated to a total liberation project – a rebellion not only against male domination but against the institutional and economic systems that evolved through it.

Crucially, this means that freedom for the Kurdish people is inextricably linked to the emancipation of women (Tank, 2017, p. 415). For Öcalan, patriarchy, the state and capitalist domination go hand in hand, meaning that there is no way out of today's world other than women's emancipation, both as a source and a method of freedom (Öcalan and Happel, 2011, p. 27). Clearly inspired by socialist feminism and the ideas of Engels, Öcalan's subsequent theoretical works put the question of women's emancipation at the heart of his revolutionary vision for a new Kurdish society (Engels and Untermann, 1902, pp. 150-154). As researcher and progressist Dilar Dirik explains, women's emancipation is conceived as a fundamental political objective rather than a by-product of the more general liberalization movement towards Kurdish political autonomy (Dirik, 2018, pp. 147-148). And as the first region in which Öcalan's ideas can be applied, Rojava has become a unique and still ongoing experiment in self-governance, in which a focus on gender equality offers a radical alternative to the religious conservatism that dominates elsewhere in the region (Dirik, 2018, pp. 147-148). Since 2012, the women of Rojava have been involved in every stage of decision-making and community-building, from drafting the constitution to establishing women's unions and academies to promote gender awareness, to establishing sustainable agriculture, to increasing the ranks of the army. Women also have a right of veto over decisions affecting them, and there are quotas stipulating that at least forty percent of political decision-makers in key administrative bodies must be women (Nilsson, 2018, pp. 265-267).

It seems that this presentation is somewhat exaggerated, however. Kurdish society is predominantly Muslim and socially conservative, despite Öcalan's secular ideas and insistence on gender equality. Female Kurdish fighters have spoken out clearly about the judgments and social ostracism suffered by women who join the army (Nilsson, 2018, pp. 269-270). Despite his popularity among left-wing intellectuals and progressive scientists, Öcalan's ideas represent only one aspect of the spectrum of Kurdish political opinion. Understanding the motivations of Kurdish women fighters requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond simplistic narratives often found in journalistic accounts. Central to this understanding is the influence of Abdullah Öcalan's pro-feminist ideology, which has fundamentally reshaped the political consciousness of many women within Kurdish armed movements. Öcalan's thought emphasizes the liberation of women as a prerequisite for broader societal transformation, positioning gender emancipation as both a personal and collective struggle embedded in the fight against all forms of domination (Käser, 2020; Jineoloji Committee Europe, 2018). This ideological framework coexists alongside two other explanations frequently

cited in academic and media discourses. First, many Kurdish women fighters are motivated by a direct response to the extreme misogyny and brutality perpetrated by the Islamic State (IS). The IS's imposition of conservative, patriarchal values and its systemic violence against women galvanized many Kurdish women to take up arms, defending not only their communities but the very possibility of women's freedom (Gunes, 2017; Marcus, 2007). This defensive motivation situates female combatants as protectors of both territory and gender rights.

Second, some scholars and journalists argue that Kurdish women fighters view the conflict against IS as an opportunity to assert their agency and demonstrate their equal capabilities within traditionally patriarchal societies. Armed struggle becomes a vehicle for social recognition and political empowerment, enabling women to challenge entrenched gender hierarchies through active participation in military and political spheres (Öcalan, 2011; Müller, 2019). This perspective highlights the strategic and symbolic dimensions of women's involvement in the conflict, framing it as both a practical and ideological breakthrough.

Together, these explanations reveal the complex interplay between ideology, reactive mobilization, and aspirations for gender equality that drive Kurdish women fighters. They embody a unique synthesis of feminist theory, cultural resistance, and pragmatic empowerment that has garnered global attention and scholarly interest alike (Shahvisi & Sayegh, 2020; Tank & Baser, 2016).

5. Kurdish Women's Responses to Islamic State: Religious and Secular Motivations

The contrast between the bravery of women, uncovered by headscarves and carrying guns, and the extremism of their opponents is a common theme in reports on Kurdish women fighters. Scholars have noted how the femininity of Kurdish women is often emphasized or even fetishized in relation to male representations of war (Tank, 2017, pp. 420-421). And while the generally secular orientation of the Kurdish political project makes it possible to dissociate "good" and "bad" Muslims in the Middle East, the underlying radical left-wing positions of Kurdish revolutionary thought seem to be neglected (Tank, 2017, p. 423). Kurdish women fighters' resistance against the Islamic State (IS) is deeply intertwined with a nuanced negotiation of religious identity that challenges extremist narratives while reclaiming faith as a source of empowerment rather than oppression. Nilsson (2018) captures this complexity, quoting Kurdish women combatants who reject IS's brutal use of religion: "It's not a problem to fight and defeat the Islamic State. The Islamic State uses the name of religion to destroy Islam. Islam has nothing to do with beheadings and the enslavement of women. You must treat your prisoners well. They are terrorists and will go to hell" (Nilsson, 2018, p. 273). This statement not only repudiates the violent distortions of Islam propagated by IS but also reclaims the faith as compatible with principles of justice and humanity.

Nilsson (2018) further explains that Kurdish women's participation in armed struggle reveals how religious sentiment can transcend its traditional

association with patriarchal social roles. Instead of preserving restrictive gender norms, religion becomes a catalyst for women's active involvement in conflict and political resistance. This redefinition disrupts common assumptions that religious adherence inherently enforces women's subordination, demonstrating how faith and feminism can co-exist within the Kurdish women's movement.

In this context, the defense of religion, the nation, and women's rights become inextricably linked initiatives. Kurdish female fighters embody this intersection by positioning their struggle not only as a battle for territorial liberation but also as a fight for the moral and social regeneration of their communities. Their resistance underscores the rejection of IS's ideological monopoly and affirms an alternative vision of Islam that embraces gender equality and social justice (Krämer, 2018; Can & Yildiz, 2020). This intersection of religious identity and military resistance aligns with broader Middle Eastern feminist scholarship, which emphasizes the diverse ways in which women navigate faith, culture, and politics (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Kurdish women fighters exemplify a political praxis where religious devotion reinforces rather than hinders their revolutionary roles, challenging simplistic binaries of secular feminism versus religious tradition (Özyürek, 2015).

At the same time, Kurdish culture's emphasis on "long history" and folklore highlights mythological narratives of utopian past worlds, and alternative forms of knowledge production, in a way that sets it apart from the secular Western paradigm. (Al-Ali and Käser, 2020, pp. 20-21). In their exploration of *Jineolojî* – a "science developed in the service of women" according to Öcalan – Al-Ali & Käser explain how stories related to Mesopotamian, Sumerian and Babylonian times are passed down through generations and celebrated as important cultural reference points shaping the histories and identities of the Kurdish people. Mythology is frequently evoked to support Öcalan's idea that there was once a time free of hierarchical gender relations, and to support contemporary aspirations for a matriarchal society in which women exercise freedom and power as they did before the advent of the capitalist state (Al-Ali and Käser, 2020, pp. 23-24). Indeed, *Jineolojî's* teaching is designed to reveal "lost truths" and challenge the Enlightenment's privileging of ontological rationality and scientific thought, re-establishing the importance of alternative, women-centered epistemological sources such as emotional intelligence and the idea of women's instinctive connection to the natural world (Al-Ali and Käser, 2020, p. 27). Without openly asserting the existence of supernatural worlds, Öcalan's teachings nonetheless have quasi-religious resonances. Fulfilling the role of a spiritual leader or deity, Öcalan's theory of patriarchy and the state has a vast and universal scope, claiming to explain thousands of years of human history leading up to the present, and offering a way to recover that lost utopian era through education (the *Jineolojî*), introspection (where both men and women unlearn internalized power structures), resistance (to domination), and sacrifice ("killing the male"), on the only path to achieving an ultimate, transformative goal. According to Öcalan, "killing the dominant male is the fundamental principle of socialism. That's what killing power

means: killing one-sided domination, inequality and intolerance. It also kills fascism, dictatorship and despotism" (Dirik, 2018, p. 150).

6. Fighting religious extremism with liberalism?

Another source of motivation often attributed to Kurdish women fighters lies in the struggle for equal rights and recognition vis-à-vis men. According to Nilsson, Kurdish women see their participation in the war as a chance both to reclaim their religion and to strengthen their *agency* as Muslim women (Nilsson, 2018, p. 275). From this point of view, the war provides a rare window of opportunity to increase this agency, change the perception of their abilities and reinforce respect for their contributions to what remains a traditional and highly patriarchal society, regardless of ideological aspirations to the contrary. Nilsson shows that Peshmerga women often cite gender equality as their main motivating factor, and that they don't reject but compensate for their role as "good Muslim wives and mothers" by proving that "even Muslim women can be fearless warriors" (Nilsson, 2018, p. 275). For Dirik, "women's struggle against the Islamic State is not only military, but also philosophical, existential. They are resisting not only the Islamic State and its feminicide policy, but also the patriarchy and rape culture that prevail within their own community" (Dirik, 2018, p. 151).

As Dirik and Tank point out, resistance to patriarchy in the Kurdish context does not fit neatly into the liberal feminist "robust like men" framework that prevails in Western discourse. It's common to think that women's participation in European wars had a modernizing effect on these societies, improving women's agency and expanding their rights, including the right to vote (Tank, 2017, p. 420; Dirik, 2018, p. 151). But applying this copy-and-paste version of history to the Kurdish context risks overlooking and depoliticizing the radical political ideology underpinning the Kurdish independence movement, in addition to the tangible political advances in gender equality already underway in territories such as Rojava (Tank, 2017, p. 420; Dirik, 2018, p. 151). Participation in combat does give rise to a questioning of gender norms within conservative Kurdistan, but many female combatants have also explicitly expressed the idea that the Kurdish vision of a new society requires them to take responsibility for their own defense (Tank, 2017, p. 421).

The liberal feminist framework of analysis is therefore inappropriate, as it tends to perceive the motivation to fight in terms of individual ambition rather than political mobilization, thus paradoxically denying the agency it aims to recognize. At the same time, Kurdish women's participation in combat breaks with more radical forms of anti-militarist feminism, in that it recognizes the need to deploy "coercive power" when necessary. In the Kurdish context, political autonomy is the essential guarantee of women's protection, but political autonomy itself requires military defense. The key element then lies in the fact that women's emancipation is an integral part of Kurdish revolutionary thought and practice, and not a side-effect of the social changes caused by the conflict (Dirik, 2018, p. 151; Dirik, 2020). Nilsson (2018) says that "the violence perpetrated against women

by the Islamic State has encouraged more Kurdish women to join the front, thus challenging their role as victims within the war, and expanding their identity from mere caregivers to protectors" (Nilsson, 2018, p. 272). But following Öcalan's ideas and the lessons of the *Jineolojî*, there is, at the outset, nothing inferior about typically feminine practices such as caring. Indeed, Öcalan's political project aims to restore "simple women carers" to their rightful place, and to a high level, within the social hierarchy. Once again, there is a risk here of excessively romanticizing the ideological motivations at play. There is a significant gap between the teachings of Jineolojî and the everyday lives of women in Kurdistan, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish analysis from propaganda in existing work on the subject. Nevertheless, Öcalan's political theory and the example of Kurdish female fighters do indeed compel us to rethink the motivations of war beyond the defense of the nation-state.

> As Tank (2017) eloquently puts it: "*The idea of building a society in which gender equality is a founding pillar strengthens the determination of Kurdish women in their fight against Daesh, by giving them a role in constructing an egalitarian future in which they fully participate politically. This perspective is profoundly different from one that views their involvement solely through the lens of gender victimization or mere resistance*" (Tank, 2017, p. 410).

7. Conclusion

Although Kurdish female fighters first came into the international spotlight in 2014, during the siege of Kobani and the fight against the Islamic State, women have been active in Kurdish political life – including in activist campaigns for independence – for decades. The imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, articulated the idea that oppressive structures such as the state and capitalism are rooted in patriarchy, meaning that the freedom of Kurdistan is inseparable from the freedom of women. Defeating patriarchy is thus seen as an essential step in creating a new society, and it is within this ideological context that the renowned female fighters of the greater Kurdish region have emerged.

Rather than framing Kurdish women's liberation solely through familiar paradigms of gender equality, this vision is embedded in a broader political project that challenges the centrality of the nation-state as the ultimate expression of freedom, even as it incorporates militarized struggle. It would be reductive to interpret the participation of Kurdish women fighters only as a reaction to the religious extremism of the Islamic State, or as a pursuit of gender agency in ways that neatly align with Western feminist trajectories. Instead, their motivations are multifaceted and overlapping – shaped by the long history of Kurdish political resistance, daily confrontations with gender-based oppression, and the socio-political volatility of the region. For this reason, it is not sufficient to say that Kurdish women fighters were motivated merely in response to the religious extremism of the Islamic State, or by the opportunity to challenge gender norms and assert greater agency in the same way as Western feminist movements. The

motivations driving Kurdish women to participate in war are complex and constantly overlapping, rooted in the history of the Kurdish independence movement as well as in daily struggles against the devaluation of women and the abuses justified by religion, all within a highly unstable regional context.

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