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Gender equality in Romania: challenges and progress

The aim of the study is to examine the achievement of the fifth Sustainable Development Goal, gender equality, in Romania. Using quantitative research techniques, the analysis focuses on a number of social and economic variables, comparing them to the EU average to give a more complete picture of the state of affairs in the nation. The findings demonstrate that while Romania has come a long way in the last several decades, there are still many obstacles in the way of gender equality. Based on the analysis, the study proposes recommendations for developing necessary strategies at the political and social levels.

Keywords: SDG 5, gender gap, caregiving responsibilities, political representation, education equality

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Introduction

In addition to being a fundamental human right, gender equality is also essential to a world that is affluent, peaceful, and sustainable. Even with significant progress made in recent years, attaining gender equality by 2030 is still a long way off (di Bella et al. 2020). Since women and girls make up half of the world's population and, thus, half of its potential, it is vital that this issue be addressed. Globally, persistent gender disparity still impedes social advancement and economic growth. Achieving the fifth goal would lead to equal access to education for women and girls, including those who have previously been unable to access it due to discrimination. This would also fulfill part of the fourth goal, which focuses on quality education. Reducing discrimination against women and girls would also make the tenth goal more attainable, which aims to reduce inequalities by supporting their participation in elections, fair employment, and economic growth.

A lot of studies address the question of gender inequality worldwide. Rivera-Mata (2022) analyzes economic gender inequalities in Spain and Portugal, advocating for the measurement of power structures and the adoption of fiscal policies to promote gender equality. Harman (2023) investigates gender pay gaps in Slovakia, emphasizing the impact of vertical segregation. The study reveals that while women often possess superior human capital characteristics compared to men, these are strongly linked to their choices in professions and fields of education, perpetuating sectoral and professional segregation. Jayarani and Sudha (2023) examine gender inequality in India using the Gender Development Index. Their analysis highlights significant disparities across states, with those prioritizing women's rights and empowerment ranking higher on the GDI. Quatami and Hamdam (2023) explore the impact of COVID-19 on female workers around the world, noting an increase in gender inequality. The findings indicate that many women faced challenges stemming from societal gender roles, workplace discrimination, and insufficient support and empathy at home and in professional settings. Jansen and Vyas-Doorgapersad (2023) identify barriers to workplace gender equality and connect these challenges to broader sustainable development goals. Masood (2023) discusses the persistent state of gender inequality across cultural and professional contexts, underscoring its role as a significant barrier for women, even in countries known for gender equality. Bush and Zetterberg (2024) address global concerns regarding gender equality, drawing attention to a recent "backlash" against the progress made in this area.

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In Romania, following the fall of communism, feminist organizations worked to address the cultural and political disparities that had developed compared to the West. In the early 1990s, the emphasis shifted towards equal rights, contrasting with the more entrenched feminist values and advanced debates seen in Western countries. During this period, domestic violence became a public issue for the first time, as the communist regime had previously ignored the problem of family abuse. Legal reforms were introduced to prevent and combat domestic violence. Despite these advancements, deeply ingrained ideologies and attitudes persisted, indicating that societal change is a gradual process (Miroiu 2004). New movements and organizations emerged, leading to the creation of new laws, such as the 2000 Ordinance No. 137, which spoke out against discrimination, and the 2002 Ordinance No. 202, which proclaimed equality of opportunity for women and men (Miroiu 2015). An important movement was the 222 Program, which started around 1995-1996, aiming to have 222 women elected to the Romanian Parliament in the long term. This means that at least half of the parliament members would be women. They introduced a new initiative, the 2,2,2 format, meaning the alternate representation of male and female candidates. Female candidates were assisted in launching their election campaigns, but this did not receive widespread public support (Miroiu 2015).

According to recent studies, the EU and Romania have made major efforts to advance gender equality by implementing strong policy frameworks. In an effort to reduce gender disparities and encourage equitable involvement in all areas of life, the European Commission has put in place a number of policies, such as the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (EC 2020). Gender mainstreaming and intersectionality form the integrative approach of the aforementioned strategy (Vinska-Tokar 2021). Similarly, Romania has improved women's representation in decision-making processes and fought gender-based violence by aligning its national policies with EU directives (Romanian Government 2020). According to surveys conducted by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), the EU scored 70.2 out of 100 in the Gender Equality Index in 2023, while Romania scored 56.1, placing it last among EU countries. Studies reveal enduring disparities in employment and income between genders in Romania and throughout the European Union. In comparison to their male counterparts, women still have difficulty finding high-quality jobs and frequently receive lesser pay (EIGE 2021). Although there has been improvement, the rate of change is still modest, and there are still significant gaps. Women's political participation has seen some improvements, yet significant gaps remain. Compared to other EU nations, Romania still has a comparatively low percentage of women in the parliament and other political positions (Council of Europe 2017). In order to guarantee more equitable representation, the EU has been pushing for policies like gender quotas; nevertheless, member states' acceptance and efficacy of these policies differ (EC 2023).

While Romania has made substantial progress towards conforming with EU gender equality requirements, there are still some sectors that need more attention when compared to the larger EU environment. For example, Romania has a smaller gender pay gap than some other EU nations, but the proportion of women in senior economic and political positions is still lower. Gender-based violence is still a major problem in Romania and the European Union. Numerous research and reports emphasise how commonplace sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and other gender-based violence are (EIGE 2021). The EU and Romania have strengthened legal protections and support networks for survivors, but practical issues and cultural differences still stand in the way of advancement. In Romania and the EU, women are becoming more educated than men, with a greater proportion of women than men graduating from higher education. Though it has not fully translated into equal chances in the job market, this tendency is a promising sign of progress towards gender equality (EC 2020). Still common is the "over-qualification" syndrome, which sees women being employed in positions below their educational attainment. The comprehensive policy frameworks of the European Union offer a benchmark for guidance, but the efficacy of these policies is contingent upon national implementation and cultural circumstances.

In the following section, we will explore the key indicators used to assess gender equality within the context of sustainable development. The paper will conclude with a synthesis of the main challenges related to SDG 5 and policy recommendations to address them.

Materials and methods

To analyse gender equality in Romania, we utilized various official data sources, including the Tempo Online and Territorial Observatory databases from the National Institute of Statistics (NIS 2024), as well as the Eurostat database, the official EU source for statistical data (Eurostat 2024). Our analysis focused on tracking the evolution of the following statistical indicators: early school leavers, physical and sexual abuse of women, the gender pay gap and employment gap, the share of women with higher education and those involved in caregiving activities, women's political participation, and the proportion of women in leadership positions.

Results and discussion

Early leavers from education and training

The school dropout rate in the European Union has been trending downward in recent years. This rate was 10.6% in 2012, fell below 10% in 2014, and has been stable at 8% since 2018. Romania, on the other hand, has greater rates. The percentage of female students who dropped out of school was close to 17% in 2012 and 15% in 2022. Although there has been a 2% decline in the last ten years, the country is still well behind the EU average. For men, a similar decreasing trend in school dropout rates can be observed across the European Union. In 2012, the dropout rate was 14.5%, which decreased to 11.1% by 2022. In Romania, the dropout rate for men was 18.5% in 2012, reaching nearly 20% in 2014-2015, and has stabilized around 15-16% in recent years. Although the dropout rate for men is higher, it is closer to the EU average than that for women (Figure 1).

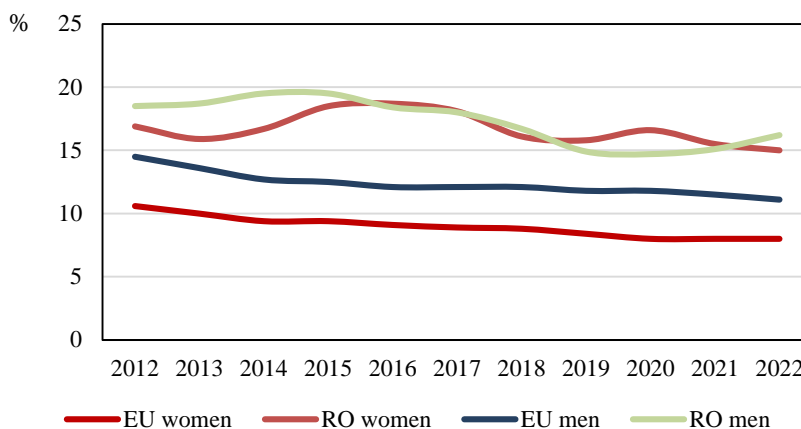


Figure 1: The rate of school dropouts among men and women aged 18-24 in Romania and the EU (2012-2022)

Source: Eurostat

In Romania, several factors contribute to the high school dropout rate, which poses a significant social problem. One of the most important factors is the country's ethnic composition, particularly the cultural customs and traditions of the Roma communities. In these communities, it is common for girls to leave school at a young age to marry early and start a family, which significantly contributes to the high dropout rate. According to a survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 93% of Roma in Romania leave education after the tenth grade, compared to 50% among other ethnic groups (FRA 2016). Additionally, economic

difficulties play a significant role. In low-income families, children are often forced to work instead of attending school, further contributing to the dropout rate. This issue is particularly acute in rural areas, where infrastructural deficiencies make access to education more difficult, leading to exceptionally high dropout rates. Parents' low educational levels and their attitudes toward the importance of education also exacerbate this (Apostu 2014). Children in these areas often suffer from a lack of adequate transportation and educational facilities, which increases their likelihood of dropping out of school. Furthermore, parental migration negatively affects children's school attendance.

All these highlight, that the highest number of school dropouts is found in villages, with the rate reaching nearly 25% in 2022. This is followed by communes, which show a 10-15% lower rate, and then cities, where the dropout rates are even lower than the EU average. In the EU, no significant difference is observed between communes and villages, and cities have approximately 5% lower dropout rates compared to the other two geographical areas. This statistic supports the assumption that in Romania, students in villages with more underdeveloped infrastructure and educational opportunities, due to their geographical location, leave education at a younger age at a higher rate than in more developed cities, which offer more opportunities and easier accessibility. Overall, the school dropout rate in Romania significantly exceeds the EU average for both genders. This is due to the combined effects of various social, economic, and cultural factors. To improve the education system and prevent early school leaving, comprehensive measures are needed, with particular attention to the Roma communities and rural areas. Emphasizing the importance of education, providing adequate infrastructure, and offering economic and social support can help reduce the early school dropout rate and improve young people's chances of achieving successful careers (Alexa-Baciu 2021).

The Romanian Ministry of Education created the Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving in Romania in accordance with the EU's plan (Ministry of Education 2015). The purpose of this national plan is to accomplish the ambitious goals of the Europe 2020 strategy as well as the national agenda. It was created to ensure a cohesive and coordinated approach to addressing early school leaving (ESL) (Popa 2020). The strategy's immediate goal was to address the primary causes of early school departure by putting in place an efficient framework of laws and regulations that prioritised prevention, intervention, and compensation. Young people between the ages of 11 and 17 were the target audience for this approach. The objective was to reach a maximum of 11.3% by 2020 among young individuals between the ages of 18 and 24 who had just completed lower secondary education and were not engaged in any type of education, as a medium-term target. By lowering the number of people at risk of unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion, the plan long-term aims to support Romania's intelligent and inclusive growth (Ministry of Education 2015).

The prevalence of physical and sexual abuse against women

Physical and sexual abuse of women is a significant problem in Europe, particularly in Central and Eastern European countries. According to the Eurostat database, the rate of physical and sexual abuse is highest among women aged 18 to 29, with this group experiencing an approximate rate of 13%. In contrast, Romania has a lower rate of about 9% in this age group. However, in older age groups, particularly among women aged 40 to 49, Romania shows above-average rates, with 10% compared to the EU average of 8%. For women aged 50 to 59, as well as those over 60, the rates are nearly identical to the EU averages.

Among Central and Eastern European countries, Romania shows better values compared to Hungary, Bulgaria, and Slovakia, and even lower rates of abuse compared to some Western European countries like Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Among women aged 18 to 29, these countries have a rate of 22%, which means that nearly a quarter of women were victims of physical or sexual abuse in the last 12 months. The rates are also higher for women aged 30 to 39, especially in Finland (14%) and Belgium (13%). The significant variation in these values,

especially the higher rates in more developed countries compared to lower rates in less developed ones, can be attributed to several factors. In Central and Eastern European countries, physical and sexual abuse often remains a taboo subject. The legacy of communism treated domestic violence as a private matter that was not reported to authorities. In contrast, in more developed countries, reporting abuse is more accepted, although women there also fear the consequences and the possibility of further abuse. Another factor is the fundamental perception of gender equality, where Romania lags slightly behind more developed countries. In these countries, movements actively work towards achieving equality in the workplace, pay, and sexual rights. Another contributing factor is the higher alcohol consumption, which is often associated with domestic or intimate partner violence. According to Eurostat, 13.8% of men in Belgium, 12.7% in Denmark, 11.4% in Luxembourg, and 10.2% in the Netherlands consume alcohol daily, compared to only 5.6% in Romania. When looking at weekly consumption, 55.5% of men in the Netherlands and 50.4% in Luxembourg consume alcohol, compared to 32.2% in Romania (Eurostat 2024). These statistics suggest that in countries with higher alcohol consumption rates, there might be a stronger correlation with domestic violence incidents, including physical and sexual abuse. However, this does not negate the influence of cultural, societal, and structural factors that also contribute to the differing rates of abuse between regions. A third factor that must also be considered is the issue of urbanization. As cities grow larger, the number of crimes, including violent incidents, tends to increase proportionally. This is why in countries with densely populated capitals and large cities, where residents come from diverse cultures and nations, the rate of violence against women tends to be higher.

The physical and sexual abuse of women is a complex problem influenced by various factors, including cultural differences, the level of development of countries, and attitudes towards gender equality. Additional factors, such as living conditions, alcohol consumption habits, and the degree of urbanization, also play significant roles. Addressing this problem requires a comprehensive approach that considers the combined impact of these factors and implements targeted measures to improve the safety and well-being of women. In recent years, support organizations for women have begun to emerge in Romania, which, in addition to providing psychological support to victims, encourage women to speak out about their situations and stand up for themselves. This has contributed to the issue of physical and sexual violence becoming less of a taboo topic in the country.

The unadjusted gender pay gap between men and women

The gender pay gap (GPG) is one of the key indicators of income differences between men and women. In the European Union, the average gender pay gap was around 16-17% in 2012, gradually decreasing over the years to below 13% recently. In Romania, the gender pay gap was 6.9% in 2012 and continued to decrease steadily until 2020. However, the pandemic caused a slight increase, although Romania still maintains one of the most favourable gender pay gap rates in the EU (Figure 2).

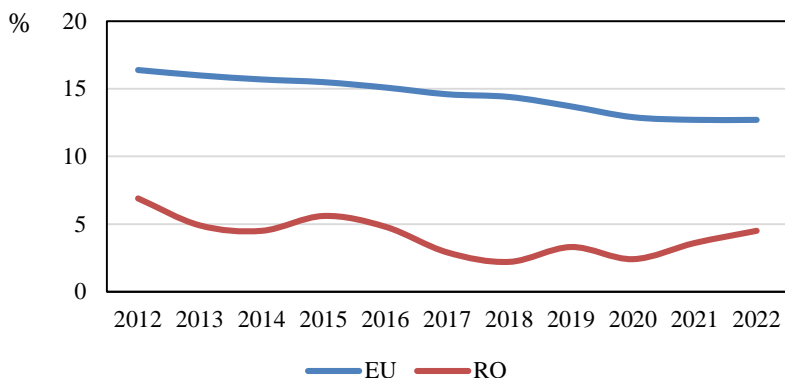


Figure 2. The unadjusted gender pay gap between men and women (2012-2022)

Source: Eurostat

This result is partly due to the differing wage disparities between the public and private sectors across various countries. In many EU countries, such as Sweden and Finland, the public sector tends to offer lower wages. In contrast, in Romania and Luxembourg, employees in the public sector receive higher salaries. The higher representation of women in better-paying public sector positions in Romania contributes to the relatively narrow gender pay gap observed in the country. Thus, the wage levels in the public sector are indeed a key factor in shaping the gender pay gap. Additionally, cultural factors, such as traditional gender roles and the perception of women's participation in the labour market, also influence the pay gap. In countries where women's participation in the workforce is more strongly supported and accepted, the gender pay gap is generally smaller.

Overall, Romania is in a favourable position compared to other EU countries regarding the gender pay gap. While there have been positive changes across the EU in recent years, the gender pay gap still exists and remains an important issue. Achieving gender pay equality requires comprehensive and targeted measures, including policy reforms, cultural shifts, and continued support for women's participation in the workforce.

Gender employment gap

Examining the gender employment gap is crucial for uncovering inequalities and understanding the structural issues within the labour market. The opportunities for developing a social economy touching on the issue of gender inequality, particularly in the field of employment was a major concern even in Northern Hungary at the beginning of the new millennium (G. Fekete-Solymári 2004).

In terms of full-time employment, the gender employment gap in Romania is notably higher than the EU average. In 2012, the gap in Romania was 17.2%, and it has increased over the years, reaching 20.1% in 2021. This rise can be partly attributed to the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected women's employment opportunities. In contrast, the EU average shows an improving trend. In 2012, the gap was 11.8%, and from 2020 onwards, it has remained below 11%. One of the primary reasons for the gender employment gap lies in the unpaid caregiving responsibilities that women often undertake (Nassar et al. 2021). Women are frequently engaged in caregiving tasks such as caring for children and elderly parents and managing household duties, for which they receive no financial compensation. Additionally, hiring discrimination and the low representation of women in leadership positions also contribute to the widening employment gap. Romania's increasing gap indicates that more targeted measures are needed to address the specific challenges women face in full-time employment. These might

include enhancing support for working parents, providing greater access to childcare, and addressing cultural norms that may discourage women's full participation in the workforce.

When it comes to part-time employment, the gender gap presents a different picture. In the EU, women are much more likely to work part-time than men are. In 2012, the average gender gap in part-time employment in the EU was -23.5%, which improved to -20.3% by 2023. This indicates that while there has been some improvement, significant disparity remains, with a substantial majority of part-time workers being women. The negative value reflects the fact that a much higher proportion of women work part-time compared to men. In contrast, Romania shows a relatively low gender employment gap in part-time jobs. Between 2012 and 2023, this gap remained consistently below 1%, indicating that the proportion of men and women working part-time in Romania is nearly equal. This suggests that part-time work is less common overall in Romania and that both men and women who do work part-time are almost equally represented. Considering regional differences and cultural influences, Romania stands out in the EU for having the smallest gender gap in part-time employment, with only a 0.7% gap in 2023. In contrast, countries like Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands show gender gaps around -40%, indicating that far more women work part-time than men in these nations do. These figures reflect the deep-rooted cultural norms regarding traditional gender roles, which significantly influence women's participation in the labour market. These disparities underscore the importance of addressing the underlying causes of the gender employment gap, such as the unequal distribution of unpaid caregiving responsibilities and the structural barriers that women face in the workforce. Promoting policies that support work-life balance, ensure equal opportunities in hiring and advancement, and provide adequate support for caregiving can help narrow these gaps and promote greater gender equality in employment.

Overall, while progress has been made, particularly in some EU countries, there remains a need for ongoing efforts to address the root causes of the gender employment gap. These efforts should focus on promoting equal opportunities, supporting work-life balance, and challenging cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequalities in the labour market.

Share of women and men with higher education degrees

The proportion of women and men with higher education degrees is an important indicator of gender equality in access to education and opportunities in the labour market. Across the European Union, the trend in recent years has shown that women are increasingly achieving higher levels of education compared to men.

In Romania, the proportion of women with higher education degrees has gradually increased over the past decade, though the growth has been modest at just 3%. In 2012, 25.6% of women aged 25 to 34 had a higher education degree, and by 2022, this figure had risen to 28.4% (Figure 3). While the proportion of women with higher education increased by 3%, the growth among men was barely above 1% over the past decade. The latest data from 2022 shows a 7.2% difference between women and men, indicating a significant disparity. Although women are more likely than men to attain higher education degrees, this does not necessarily translate into higher full-time employment rates for women. Emphasizing the importance of education and ensuring access to further education opportunities are crucial for achieving gender equality.

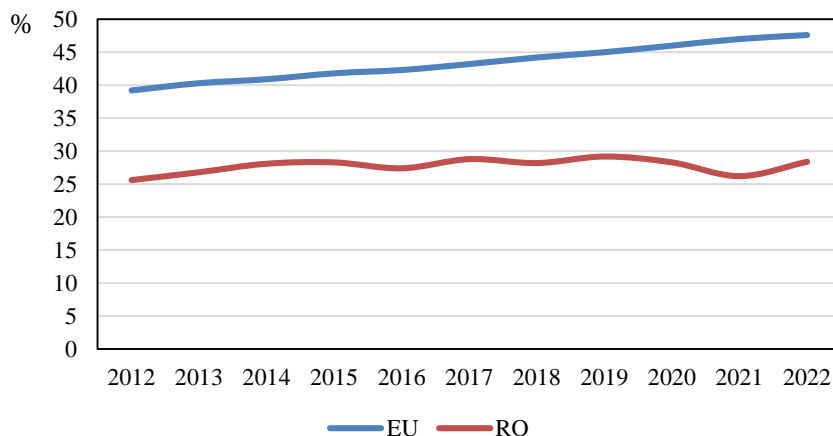


Figure 3. Percentage of women aged 25-34 with higher education in Romania and the EU between 2012 and 2022

Source: Eurostat

In 2012, 39.2% of women in the EU had a higher education degree, and this figure rose to 47.6% by 2022, representing an 8.4% increase. This growth is nearly three times that of Romania, where the increase was just 3% over the same period. Currently, Romania lags behind the EU average by 19.2%, highlighting a substantial difference.

Cultural differences, the presence of Roma communities, and the importance of agricultural work are all contributing factors to the lower proportion of individuals with higher education degrees in Romania. Many students, particularly in rural areas where agriculture remains a leading sector, choose to work in agriculture after completing 12 years of schooling rather than pursuing higher education. Additionally, teenage pregnancy plays a significant role in preventing women from continuing their education. The quality of the education system and the limited opportunities offered by educational institutions also contribute to the trend of many young people choosing to study abroad.

Targeted steps must be taken to address these difficulties in order to improve the situation. This can entail raising educational standards, expanding access to postsecondary education, especially in rural regions, and helping adolescent girls overcome obstacles like early pregnancy. Romania can strive to provide better gender equality in employment and education by tackling these variables and reducing the gap with the EU average.

Share of women and men engaged in caregiving activities

The ratio of women to men engaged in caregiving activities is a significant indicator of gender roles and responsibilities within households and society. Caregiving typically includes tasks such as caring for children, elderly family members, or relatives with disabilities, as well as managing household chores. This unpaid work is often disproportionately carried out by women, which can affect their participation in the labour market and overall economic opportunities.

The proportion of women in the non-active population who are involved in caregiving tasks has been steadily increasing in Romania. In 2012, 28.7% of non-working women were engaged in caregiving, and by 2020, this figure had nearly reached 40%. This indicates that a significant portion of non-working women are occupied with caregiving responsibilities, reinforcing the persistence of traditional gender roles in Romania. In contrast, the proportion of men involved in caregiving in Romania is much lower than that of women (3.1% in 2020). The data clearly indicate that traditional gender roles remain strongly present in Romania, contributing to challenges in

balancing private life and career. The unequal distribution of household tasks limits women's participation in economic life, leading to lower employment rates and a wider gender pay gap. Moving away from traditional gender roles or presenting them in a more nuanced way, along with a more equitable distribution of household responsibilities, could significantly enhance women's participation in the labor market. This would not only help reduce the employment and pay gaps but also positively impact the country's economic performance.

Comprehensive laws and initiatives that boost women's economic engagement and call for a more equitable distribution of caregiving obligations are required to advance gender equality. Better daycare availability, flexible work schedules, shared parental leave, and public awareness efforts to question and alter gender roles in society are a few examples of such projects. Encouraging an atmosphere in which women and men may equally contribute to and benefit from economic growth requires taking these steps.

Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and governments

The political participation of women and the achievement of gender equality within political institutions are crucial issues in modern democracies.

The proportion of women in national parliaments across the EU has been steadily increasing over the past decade. While in 2012, the proportion of women was 25.3%, by 2022, this figure had surpassed 33%. In contrast, in Romania, the proportion of women remained around 10-12% until 2017, after which a significant increase occurred following the 2016 elections, with the proportion rising by 7%. However, since then, there has been stagnation, and no significant changes have occurred in recent years (Figure 4).

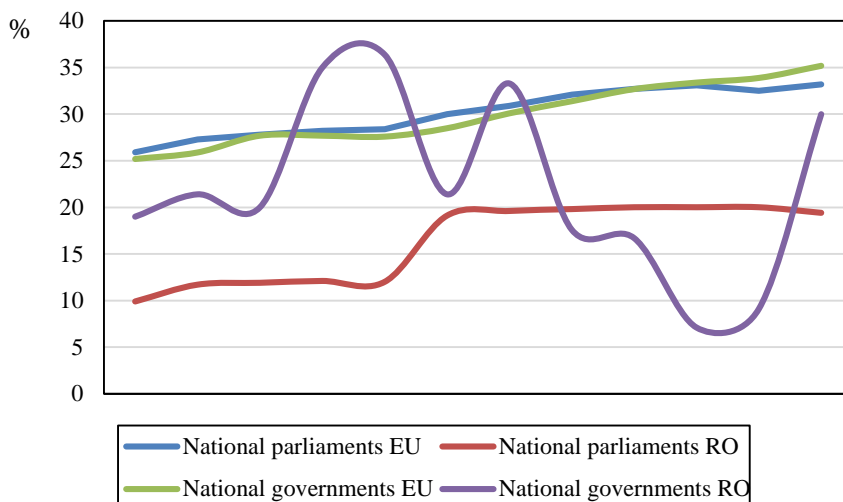


Figure 4. Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and governments in Romania and EU (2012-2023)

Source: Eurostat

The proportion of women in national governments also shows a varied picture. In the EU, there has been a steady increase over the past decade; in 2012, the proportion was 25.2%, and from 2018 onwards, it surpassed 30%. However, in Romania, significant fluctuations can be observed. Between 2012 and 2014, the proportion of women in the national government was around 20%, but from 2018 onwards, there was a continuous decline, with the proportion dropping to just 7.1% and 9.1% in 2021 and 2022, respectively. In 2023, however, there was a significant increase of 20%, bringing the proportion up to 30%.

In Romania, only four of the parties represented in the national parliament have women's organizations: AUR, PNL, PSD, and RMDSZ. These organizations have set various goals, such as increasing women's political participation, achieving equality, and supporting women in the public sphere. However, the activities of these women's organizations often aim to promote a traditional, family-oriented image and do not always focus on achieving equality (Bălută-Tufiș 2021).

The low proportion of women in politics can be attributed to two main factors: supply-side and demand-side issues. On the supply side, women are generally less inclined to participate in political life, while on the demand side; there is a problem with societal prejudices against female political figures. Women's willingness to engage in politics is also influenced by the lack of support for their participation and their self-perception of not being adequately qualified (Höhmman 2024). The importance of family in women's lives is another factor on the supply side, as women in leadership positions often face the challenge of choosing between their careers and their families, which holds them back (Le Barbanchon-Sauvagnat 2019). On the demand side, the perception of women's roles and responsibilities, which is closely tied to cultural norms, plays a significant role. While supply-side factors focus on what women think of themselves, demand-side factors are shaped by the opinions of voters and citizens. In countries where traditional female roles are emphasized, the population is less likely to vote for female candidates (Le Barbanchon-Sauvagnat 2019). According to the World Value Survey conducted between 2017 and 2020, 40% of respondents in Romania strongly agreed with the statement: "Men make better political leaders than women." In contrast, in the Nordic countries, the percentage was below 15%. This highlights how cultural differences significantly contribute to the low participation of women in political life (Le Barbanchon-Sauvagnat 2019).

Many institutional and cultural elements influence women's political engagement. Family responsibilities and conventional gender roles frequently discourage women from pursuing careers in politics. Women's growth is additionally hampered by societal stereotypes and a lack of support in politics. The encouraging developments seen throughout the EU suggest that women's political engagement may be raised with the right policies.

The proportion of women in senior management positions

Gender equality in leadership positions is an exceptionally important issue for modern economies. In the EU, the proportion of women in board positions has steadily increased over the past decade. In 2012, the proportion was around 16%, which doubled by 2023, reaching 33.8%. In contrast, the growth in Romania has been less remarkable (Iorga 2018). Between 2012 and 2020, the proportion fluctuated between 8% and 13%, then from 2021 onward, there was a significant increase, with the proportion rising to 21.8% by 2023. This indicates that Romania is currently at the point where the EU was ten years ago.

The low proportion of women in leadership positions in Romania and the EU can be attributed to similar factors. Cultural differences and traditional gender roles, which often see men as natural leaders, play a significant role. Women's caregiving responsibilities, such as managing the household, raising children, and caring for elderly relatives, are difficult to reconcile with the demands of leadership positions. These responsibilities limit women's opportunities and roles, contributing to their lower representation in leadership. Studies indicate that the areas where gender prejudice is most prevalent, for both sexes, are related to women's managerial skills, work-life balance, and domestic duties. The primary causes of the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic work and the restriction of women to the private sphere account for the low level of economic empowerment of women (Helgeson 2012, Offer 2016, Birsănuț-Man 2023).

Increasing the proportion of women in senior management could contribute to economic growth and gender equality. Having more women in leadership positions would not only improve corporate performance but also have a positive impact on the country's economic performance. However, to achieve this, traditional female roles and the distribution of caregiving

responsibilities need to be modernized. The data shows that while there have been positive changes in the proportion of women in senior leadership in Romania, these results are not consistent and often fluctuate. Compared to the EU, Romania still lags significantly in the proportion of women on boards, while it occasionally exceeds the EU average in executive roles. Cultural changes and the modernization of traditional gender roles are crucial to ensuring that more women can attain leadership positions, which in the long term could also contribute to the country's economic growth.

Conclusion

Gender equality is a cornerstone of sustainable development and social progress. Realising gender equality in leadership roles, tackling inequalities in education and work, and preventing gender-based violence are essential for Romania and the EU to meet their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Though there has been some progress, there are still many obstacles to overcome, especially in Romania where structural constraints, cultural norms, and traditional gender roles prevent women from fully participating in different facets of public and economic life. In order to solve these issues and achieve gender equality, this essay examines the policy consequences and suggestions that are required.

Among the most urgent problems is the high number of early school dropouts, especially in Romania. Gender equality is largely fuelled by education, which lays the groundwork for women's social and economic empowerment. Targeted assistance for at-risk children is necessary to lower the number of pupils who drop out of school early, particularly in rural and marginalised regions. In order to maintain students' interest in learning, financial aid, mentorship programs, and community-based educational efforts can be extremely important. Expanding technical and vocational training programs also provides students who might not pursue traditional higher education with alternate career paths. We can decrease dropout rates and improve economic prospects for women by matching these programs to the requirements of the local economy and giving young people the skills they need for the workforce.

In Romania and the EU, gender-based violence continues to be a significant obstacle to gender equality. In order to counteract this, comprehensive victim support networks need to be established and reinforced. This entails offering easily accessible shelters, therapy programs, and legal support, especially in remote and underprivileged locations. Campaigns for public awareness are also crucial in challenging cultural norms that support violence against women. Through the involvement of educators, journalists, and community leaders, these programs aim to influence cultural perceptions and foster a climate that values women's safety and respect. In addition to being morally required, addressing gender-based violence is a critical first step in empowering women to fully engage in society.

Even while Romania's unadjusted gender pay gap is smaller than the EU average, it nevertheless shows underlying structural disparities. Robust enforcement methods in addition to tougher legislation requiring equal pay for equal effort are required to close this disparity. There should be fines for employers who fail to perform periodic pay audits and report on gender pay gaps. Pay structure transparency is also essential since it makes discrepancies easier to find and fix. We can lower the overall gender employment gap and improve women's financial security by making sure they are fairly compensated for their labour.

Another major issue is the gender employment gap, which is a result of uneven caregiving obligations and traditional gender norms. Women cannot manage caregiving responsibilities and stay in the workforce without policies that promote work-life balance. Examples of these policies include prolonged parental leave for both parents, flexible work schedules, and remote work opportunities. It is equally crucial to increase access to high quality, reasonably priced childcare and elder care services since it frees up women to pursue full-time jobs and lessens the stress of caring for others. We can develop a more inclusive labour market that recognises and encourages the contributions of women by removing these systemic obstacles (Robayo-Abril et al. 2023).

One important area where gender equality needs to be achieved is political representation. Cultural norms and the design of political institutions play a major role in Romania's low percentage of women in national parliaments and governments. Gender quotas within political parties should be strengthened or instituted in order to boost the representation of women. By guaranteeing that women are fairly represented on candidate lists, these quotas improve the likelihood of women getting elected. Furthermore, programs designed especially for women to provide mentorship and leadership training can aid in developing the abilities, self-assurance, and networks required for success in the political sphere. We can guarantee that the needs and viewpoints of both men and women are taken into consideration when formulating legislation by advocating for gender parity in political leadership.

One major obstacle to workplace gender equality is the under-representation of women in senior management roles. In order to solve this, businesses should be urged to implement gender diversity programs, such as establishing goals for the percentage of women in management roles and giving them access to chances for leadership development. Removing bias from the workplace is also essential, necessitating the use of diverse hiring panels, blind hiring procedures, and gender-neutral assessment standards. We can provide women with opportunities to progress into leadership positions by cultivating an inclusive corporate culture, which will eventually help businesses and the economy as a whole.

Lastly, a more significant cultural transformation is needed to achieve gender equality. Gender roles and the significance of equality can be instilled in children at an early age through educational changes that incorporate gender equality into the national curriculum. In order to question established conventions and advance an inclusive society, public involvement and advocacy are also essential. Through collaborating with civil society organisations, community groups, and the media, we can promote societal change and increase awareness of the advantages of gender diversity.

In order to alleviate gender disparity in Romania, the following specific policy proposals are based on the main issues raised in this analysis:

- a). Lowering School Dropout Rates: Encourage at-risk students to continue their education by implementing mentorship programs and offering financial aid, with an emphasis on rural and marginalized populations.
- b). Increasing Vocational Training: Create technical and vocational education programs that are suited to the economic demands of the area and provide women in particular with workforce-ready skills and other career pathways.
- c). Addressing Gender-Based Violence: Provide victims with all-encompassing support networks, such as shelters, counselling, and legal assistance, with a focus on making sure access is available in rural and underprivileged areas.
- d). Enforcing equal pay laws and implementing work-life balance-promoting measures, such flexible work schedules, can help women's financial stability and professional prospects.
- e). Improving Political Representation: To guarantee fair representation on candidate lists and boost the number of women in leadership positions, political parties should implement gender quotas.
- f). Increasing Workplace Equality: Encourage the presence of women in senior management by establishing goals for representation and creating conditions that help women grow as leaders.

Gender equality in Romania and the EU is a difficult goal that calls for a multipronged strategy. Considerable progress towards accomplishing the SDGs can be made by putting the policy suggestions discussed in this essay into practice. In addition to enhancing women's prospects and well-being, these policies will strengthen social cohesiveness, economic growth, and societal resilience. Beyond being an aim in and of itself, gender equality is necessary for both sustainable development and the full realisation of everyone's human rights.

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