

## Gender Equality from International Commitments to National Realities - the Case of Romania

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## Article

# Gender Equality from International Commitments to National Realities – the Case of Romania

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**Abstract:** *In this paper, we will look over some of the most important and widely spread international commitments in terms of achieving gender equality and empowering women such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Istanbul Convention, with a particular focus pointed towards the issues in implementing*

*these ground-breaking gender equality treaties and initiatives. The paper offers an overview of the way a specific state, Romania, manages to implement these kinds of commitments in general terms, if and how the Romanian Government has succeeded in implementing the legislative packages necessary for the harmonisation of the national legislation with the international commitments taken by the government, what statistic position among European countries does Romania occupy in terms of gender equality and what are the recommendations provided by the United Nations for dealing with Romania's gender equality issues. Lastly, a more in detail examination of the current framework used to teach gender equality in the national education system will be provided, touching on subjects such as gender balance among education staff, the cognitive, socio-emotional and be-*

*havioural learning objectives set by UNESCO and how they apply to gender to gender issues in the school curriculum for all ages in Romania.*

**Keywords:** *2030 Agenda; Beijing Declaration; Education; Gender Equality; Istanbul Convention; Romania*

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## 1. Introduction

Gender equality is a widely talked about topic that has ramifications in most fields related to human activity and as a consequence should occupy a central place in policy making and public debate. In this paper,

we will look over some of the most important and widely spread international commitments in terms of achieving gender equality and empowering women and then it will go over an overview of the way a specific state, Romania, manages to implement this kind of commitments in general terms, as well as in the specific case of its national education system.

The central question that we try to answer is if international commitments on the subject of gender equality tend to translate properly at the national levels; and in order to observe this transition between international to national, we looked at Romania because we believe that there is a greater need for research on this subject in order to raise awareness on some of the current policy implementation issues when it comes to gender equality.

In this paper, we will assume that there is a dissonance between what the Romanian government plans to do in terms of advancing gender equality and what it actually achieves on the ground by the end. In order to test this hypothesis, we will research the most important and widely spread international commitments in terms of achieving gender equality and empowering women such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Istanbul Convention, and then we will look over the way Romania implements the provisions of them, especially when it comes to its education curriculum.

## **2. Main International Commitments on Gender Equality**

Gender equality is a widely talked about topic that has ramifications in most fields related to human activity and as a consequence should occupy a central place in policy making and public debate.

To begin with, the concept of gender equality was first introduced as a human right in 1948 as part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was a great step forward for women everywhere, that had been long advocated by the members of the feminist movement, a group that still fights for the achievement of gender equality even many decades after these first steps were taken.

### **2.1 The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**

Until now, the United Nations (UN) has held 4 world conferences on the status of women, in 1975, 1980, 1985 and in 1995. During those years, multiple reports were made, declarations drafted and commitments taken by international actors and decision makers worldwide. Most noteworthy, with ramification to the present day, is the fourth and last conference held by the UN in 1995 at Beijing. This conference has led to the creation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which was adopted unanimously by 189 countries and was praised as a visionary agenda and is currently still considered one of the most comprehensive global policy frameworks and blueprint for women empowerment in use (UN, 1995).

The Declaration is in line with multiple international agreements that it fully supports and endorses such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN, 1979), the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (UN, 1993) and the Declaration on the Right to Development (UN, 1986) that states in article 8 that „Effective measures should be undertaken to ensure that women have an active role in the development process”.

The action plan of the Beijing declaration put forwards a roadmap for the achievement of gender equality that can be summed up through its 12 points of critical areas of concern that still hold up to this day:

1. Women and poverty
2. Education and training of women
3. Women and health
4. Violence against women
5. Women and armed conflict
6. Women and the economy
7. Women in power and decision-making
8. Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women
9. Human rights of women
10. Women and the media
11. Women and the environment
12. The girl child

In order to solve all these problems and to achieve the objectives of the action plan, the countries that signed the declaration agreed for it to be reviewed and updated every 5 years so it does not lose its relevance in the convoluted and rapidly changing world of today. The review, as well as the overall monitoring of the progress done by countries in implementing the action plan is overseen by the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

## **2.2 The Beijing+25 and Issues of Implementation**

The latest review of the Beijing Declaration took place in 2020, when 25 years from the signing of this historical document were celebrated. With the occasion of the Beijing+25, as it was called, the Commission put together and reviewed the obstacles faced in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development from a gender equality and the women empowerment point of view. Among the main problems identified is the uncontrollable number of economic models that further deepen inequalities, promote *de facto* and sometimes *de jure* the exemption of big corporations from any repercussion associated with the negative impacts of their businesses on people or the nature and are hyper focused on growth over human well-being and social inclusion (UN Women, 2019; European Commission, n.d.). An equally vexing problem is the fact that state-based conflicts are more spread-out and have significantly intensified since 1995, especially in the last two decades, which only leads to a further marginalisation of women and a proliferation of conservative patriarchal practices which represent a direct result of anti-democratic movements pursue to weaken human rights (UN Women, 2019; Roser et al., 2016). The struggle for equal, fair and stable democratic systems does not seem to come any closer to an end as, according to the Freedom House data, global freedom declined for the 17th consecutive year in 2023 (Gorokhovskaia et al., 2023).

Some of the widest discussed national and international proposed solutions were to hold accountable through legal binding instruments, as well as public pressure all the actors that can perpetuate gender issues, be them private, state or multilateral actors, such as transnational corporations, and to build an international web of support with no tolerance for any acts done by them with the intention to eliminate or constrain sexual and reproductive rights, to perpetuate through their activity or inactivity gender and sexual violence, hate and terror crimes, etc., and lastly, to ensure that a gender inclusive and participatory perspective is included in conflict resolution and security and peace making (UN Women, 2019).

Needless to say, these solutions seem far away from going anywhere close from the discussion to the implementation level, especially if we consider the cleavage present in society on

some of the most important topics to be addressed with such policies, as it is the case for gender equality (Sass & Kuhnle, 2023). Currently, even some of the world's most developed and highly praised regions for their gender policies and overall social awareness struggle to actually implement them.

As an example, the Council of the European Union has pointed out that all the member states face obstacles in fully implementing the Platform of Action even though 25 years have passed since the Beijing Declaration. Such is the case for ensuring sexual and reproductive services for all women, gender mainstreaming, eliminating the gender pay gap, the unequal distribution of unpaid work or dealing with gender-based violence (Council of the European Union, 2019). More specifically, just as previously discussed, the Council highlighted as an issue the economic inequalities presented between men and women, caused in part by the dysfunctional relation between wellbeing and the economy and underlined the fact that women face on average a greater risk of poverty, especially if they have to take care of a child, an elder family member or a disabled relative, task that generally falls on women alone and is often unpaid and underappreciated (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Going even further, research done by OECD showed that women perform on average between 3 and 6 hours of unpaid work per day compared to men who usually spend between half an hour and 2 hours per day, the data including unpaid care, as well as housework (Ferrant et al., 2014). At the moment, EU's targets only aim towards increasing the accessibility and affordability of childcare but, in order to truly ease women's burden, the entire care sector must be reformed, with more options available for the elder and disabled people and with appropriate pay and due recognition given to the caregivers, most of whom are women (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Another underlying problem is the lack of proper monitoring tools usually due to lack of appropriate indicators or improper measurement to begin with. In this sense, the EU recognizes the shortcoming of its own monitoring system, especially when it comes to measuring gender-based violence or poverty and the risk of poverty considering that measurements are made at the household level and not the individual level (Council of the European Union, 2019).

It can therefore be seen that regardless of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action visionary character for its time, 25 years later, we still struggle to achieve some of the proposed action from its original publication. The main tactic that was chosen in order to deal with this issue is to bring forward the unfulfilled commitments of the past and tie them along with present (soon to be unfulfilled) commitments. Specifically, how the Beijing +25 review was strongly linked to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

### ***2.3 The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development***

The 2030 Agenda was built around 5 Ps, which are used for defining the most important areas of action: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership and it proposed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets in order to achieve these goals worldwide (UN General Assembly, 2015).

Out of all of them, there is one which is specifically focused on gender equality, the SDG number 5, achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (UN, 2023). This SDG has 10 distinct targets and besides it, almost all the SDGs, even if they don't explicitly mention it, have an implicit gender dimension as it is necessary to take gender equality into account and provide fair treatment to all in order to achieve their goals (UN Women, 2018). In

fact, out of the 246 indicators used for global monitoring from the UN Global Indicator Framework, 104 were identified as being gender-related, which only serves to highlight the important role that women can play in achieving a better world for all (OECD, 2020).

That being said, data availability is considered a serious issue in actually using these indicators in the monitoring process. It was estimated that we have available data for only about 33% of the 104 indicators mentioned previously (OECD, 2020), with significant data gaps across all SDGs and even no gender-specific indicators for multiple SDGs such as number 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation, 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy, 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production, 14 – Life Below Water, 15 – Life on Land and 17 – Partnership for the Goals (UN, 2022). Disaggregated data can be seen as the key factor in understanding the current landmark of gender based issues and for prompting world leaders to take decisions, tailored made for the specific needs and circumstances of women as they result from their environment but, unfortunately, disaggregation of data is no small feat, especially when dealing with such complex issue as the intersectionality of gender related issues and even the biggest international organisations fail to fulfil this task (OECD, 2020).

The main issues faced by data collectors are that disaggregated data takes more time and it is more expensive to collect, interpret and then produce than aggregated data (Seck et al., 2023). These problems are hard to overcome first and foremost because time is of the essence when taking action to help women, especially in times of crisis and in countries where they don't have the infrastructure and know-how that is necessary to undertake this kind of task and where the policy making process is already hard to navigate through and inefficient. Also, when it comes to money, funding for gender data fell by more than 50% between 2019 and 2020 (Seck et al., 2023) which is even more concerning if we also point out that the SDG 5, achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, is one of the three least financed SDGs globally (European Commission, 2020).

It can even be said that it is hard to see the European Union as a global leader in terms of gender equality and the empowerment of women if we consider the fact that, none of the EU member states has completed the SDG 5 Gender Equality and neither one of them is on track to achieve it by 2030, as stated by *Europe Sustainable Development Report* (SDSN Europe, 2022) or the *Monitoring report on progress towards the SDGs in an EU context* (Eurostat, 2023).

When it comes to the feasibility of the 2030 Agenda and its tight time scale for completion, it is predicted that if we keep moving at our current rate of progress, it may take another 286 years to remove discriminatory laws and close prevailing gaps in legal protections for women and girls, in sub-Saharan Africa, more women and girls will live in extreme poverty by 2030 than do today and the glass ceiling experienced by women who want to advance in their careers will not be broken and parity will not be achieved for another 140 years (UN, 2022).

Returning to the present day though, besides the 2030 Agenda and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, there are other important international commitments for dealing with gender related issues and empowering women that decision makers are struggling to fully implement.

## 2.4 The Istanbul Convention

The Istanbul Convention, also known as the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence was signed in 2011 and its main purpose was to tackle gender-based violence and eliminate all forms of abuse and discrimina-

tion against women (Council of Europe, n.d.). The Convention defines “violence against women” in article 3 as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women but when it comes to domestic violence, the Convention goes one step further and showcases its progressive approach in terms of gender equality by also introducing men in the equation, not only as perpetrators but also as potential victims of domestic violence themselves (Council of Europe, 2011). This move does not in any way undermine women and their struggles, as it is clearly stated that the large majority of domestic abuse victims are women, but by also introducing men in the protective framework that the Convention seeks to establish, it can create a bigger space of discussion on the topic of domestic violence, one in which even men that were initially reluctant to join can be part of.

In order to achieve its objectives, the Convention proposed four main areas of action: prevention, protection, prosecution and coordinated policies and through them it aims to create a comprehensive set of policies and actions that will be legally binding and obligatory for all the states that sign and ratify it, with the final objective being to protect women and girls from all forms of violence and help all the victims of domestic violence (Council of Europe).

Currently, out of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe, 37 countries have ratified the Convention, plus the European Union that has recently voted to ratify it (10.05.2023), however this decision does not force the remaining 6 EU member states (Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia) that have not ratified it to do so and, even more concerning, Poland declared its intention to walk the same road as Türkiye which withdrew from the Convention in 2021, making history as the first country to ratify the Convention and subsequently, the first one to ever withdraw from it (Euronews, 2023).

The Council of Europe has sounded the alarm regarding the disinformation promoted by certain conservative groups in regards to the provisions of the Convention, that ultimately aim to discredit it and block its implementation, such as the case of Türkiye (Council of Europe, 2022). The main points that the Council has tried to clarify are therefore that its aim is to end all types of violence against women and girls and not to promote a “hidden gay agenda”, as it has been claimed, because it used the word gender and not sex for describing gender-based violence; the convention does not represent a threat to families or family values because it recognizes that domestic violence can take place even between non marital partners regardless of their sex and also, it does not encourage irregular or illegal migration by its provision that ensures that victims are not dependent on the residency status of their aggressors in order to receive help (Council of Europe, 2022; Council of Europe, 2023).

## **2.5 Council of Europe’s Gender Equality Strategies**

Considering that the Istanbul Convention could not achieve a uniform effect in all member states, the Council integrated the prevention and fight against gender-based violence and domestic violence in its first Gender Equality Strategy of 2014-2018 (Council of Europe, 2014) and because this issue has not been solved, it can also be found in its current strategy for the period 2018-2023 (Council of Europe, 2018).

The current strategy is basically a retelling of the old one, but with an increased degree of complexity in its approach and with the addition of one extra strategic area that was not mentioned in the former strategy, protecting the rights of migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls (Council of Europe, 2018).

This approach of rewriting commonly assumed commitments between states under a different format, especially those from past documents that still remain unaccomplished to this day, show how dire the situation of implementing gender-based policies at grassroots level actually is. Despite promises at higher levels, multiple states struggle to achieve internationally agreed objectives (such as Romania). Consequently, the prevailing approach within the international community appears to be that of fortifying these commitments by rearticulating identical objectives through diverse juridical instruments, including conventions, strategic initiatives, policy directives, and even overarching sustainable development goals, which collectively exhibit substantial conceptual congruence.

We will look further at the case of Romania in order to illustrate and better understand this phenomenon and then at the way that this country manages to integrate gender equality in its education system to see if at least the next generation will be better prepared to tackle the problems that the country faces in terms of empowering women and girls and achieving a truly equal society.

### **3. Romania after the Beijing Declaration: A Further Analysis on Romanian Development Strategy on Gender Equality**

As proved in the previous pages, the gender equality topic is a complex issue that various international institutions have pointed out as an important (yet struggling) area that deserves more attention. Zooming in from the international context to the Romanian reality of the past 30 years, the following section aims to tackle two important aspects: first, to provide a general look into the current legislative framework and second, to briefly present and analyse the currently proposed action plan meant to respect and implement the promises of the Beijing agreement in accordance with UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The primary document acknowledging the issue of gender equality is the Romanian Constitution. Article 16 (1) states that „Romanian citizens are equal before the law, without any privilege or discrimination”. The non-discrimination principle covers all the other areas from the Constitution, such as right to education, work, protection against discrimination and violence and so on. Thus, the power that this document has ensures that any further action from the Romanian context is legally binding with respect to each and every citizen without any discrimination.

Further laws are more specifically focused on gender issues. One of the most important laws in this regard is considered to be the Law 202/2002 on Equal Opportunities and Equal Treatment of Women and Men since it clearly states the respect of equal opportunities and equal treatment in field of work environment, education, health, culture, access to information, decision making procedures and the right for the victim in question to formally address and report existing situations of discrimination in any of the cases stated above. Articles 7-13 clearly defines the understanding of sex-based discrimination, gender-based violence, different types of harassment (sexual, psychological) and further states the obligation of public and private employment actors to provide equal opportunities, without any form of discrimination.

Law 1/2011 on National Education regulates the higher education system as to prohibiting any form of discrimination based on not only sex but also ethnicity, age, religious affiliation and so on.

As observed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2022a), in terms of policy initiatives, Romania has taken a few steps forward in the recent decades. The 2018-2021



National Strategy for the Promotion of Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Women and Men represents a key initiative, focusing on three main objectives that cover reproductive health, professional-family life balance and the integration of women in the decision-making process. The actions created in accordance to these goals include the development of a unified methodology for gender mainstreaming of national programmers, creation of a national network of experts in the area of equal opportunities and increasing the NGOs capacities to promote and contribute to alternative solutions in gender budgeting.

In 2021, a new strategic document established by the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men provides an action plan covering the 2021-2027 for gender equality and prevention of domestic violence, although it has been adopted only in December of 2022.

The previously mentioned strategy comes under the responsibility of ANES, The National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men, a very important institutional body for the Romanian topic of gender equality. However, as the EIGE analysts have observed, its status has currently been under threat since being downgraded to a directorate between 2010 and 2015 due to the economic crisis. Although, Article 3(1) of Government Decision 177/2016 states that ANES exerts a function of authority that ensures the active and visible integration of a gender perspective in all national policies and programmers, „the provision to implement gender mainstreaming is not enforced by any sanctions mechanism” (EIGE, 2022a).

Another important institutional body is represented by The National Commission for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men (CONES) functioning as an inter-ministerial body with ANES and reuniting twice a year to conduct various activities and promote gender equality practices throughout the other ministries.

The National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) is an independent body responsible for promoting equal treatment and preventing sex-based discrimination. Established by Government Decision No. 1194/2001, it has various legislative provisions and objectives outlined in the National Strategy ‘Equality, inclusion and diversity for the period 2018-2022.’ The CNCD ensures non-discrimination on various grounds, including race, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, and disadvantaged group status.

These represent just a small part of the Romanian legislative framework that prove the issue of gender equality is recognized and tackled with responsibility. However, a solid legal framework is not enough to successfully implement and maintain the goals it pursues. The reality of the Romanian gender equality issue cannot be analysed by solely looking at laws, as we need further data in order to propose an overall picture as accurate as possible. At the same time, one should keep in mind that certain data and facts need to be taken with a pinch of salt as it may mislead regarding the main reason for things being a certain way. For example, there is one particular field in which throughout the European race, Romania has come on top of others: the wage gap. At the EU level, Romania has the second lowest pay gap after Luxembourg (Eurostat, 2021) the only country where women earn more than men. As the Article 41 (4) of the Romanian Constitution clearly states: „For equal work, women have the same salary as men”. Still, keep in mind that this achievement may not reflect the efficiency of current gender equality policies, but rather represents a spillover effect dating back from the communist regime where men and women were promoted as equal workforce in the labour field.

That being said, the reality of the past decades proves that although there are ongoing waves of new initiatives, papers and strategies, there are still missing steps between the theo-

retical stage and the implementing one. While some of the measures indicated in the documents are legally binding (ex: girls cannot be banned from attending school), others indicate good practices without a proper way of implementing or sanctioning them.

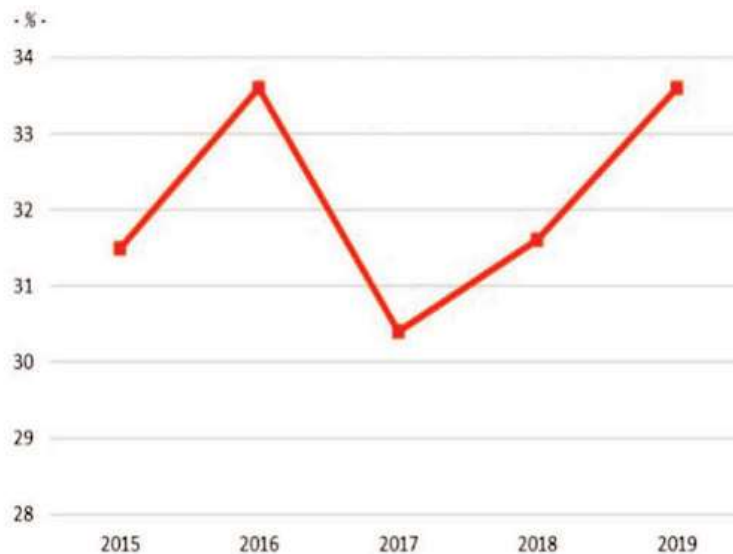
This has been one of the reasons for which at the EU level, Romania has been placed on the 26<sup>th</sup> place, with a score of 53% for the year of 2022, as the EIGE Gender Equality Index shows (2022a). The report indicates that Romanian status has been gradually improving for the past few years but still leaves room for progress especially in the areas of women involvement in political and economic decision-making. The COVID-19 pandemic had also taken its toll on family roles, as childcare responsibilities and household work fell primarily on women 's shoulders, as shown in the previous sections.

That being said, Romania seems to cover the generally appropriate legislative framework meant to establish and protect its citizens from gender discrimination. Although, the efficiency of those theoretical instruments can be massively affected by how they are implemented or how certain actors choose to interpret them. To this extent, in the following section we would like to comparatively analyse the Romanian Sustainable Development Strategy for 2020 with the general UN targets regarding the SDG number 5 on gender equality in order to raise certain question marks regarding the relevance of the correlation of those indicators and if they focus on the target they are connected to.

Looking at both the targets named by the UN and the ones Romania has chosen for its strategy, we believe there are some comments to be made.

The first target stated in the strategy, 5.1.1 (the 5.5 target equivalent of the UN strategy) (see Table 1) provides an overall view over the women rate in leadership positions, with a range between 31%-34% between 2015 and 2019.

Table 1: Women rate in leadership position



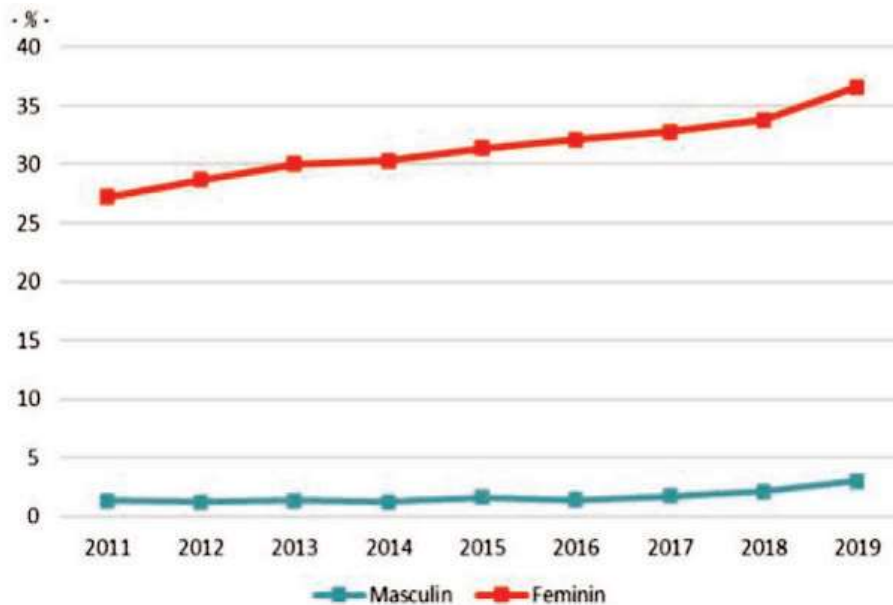
Source: Government of Romania (2020, p. 64)

The data mainly refers to managerial positions such as chairman, non-executive directors, senior executives and employee representatives. The problem here is that the data is solely focusing on the economic sector, rather missing the political dimension of women's involve-

ment, while the UN target combines these two sectors „Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life” while clearly pointing out to different sets of indicators, respectively „Proportion of seats held by women in (a) national parliaments and (b) local governments” and „Proportion of women in managerial positions”. Thus, Romanian strategy does not specify any mechanism used to either ensure or investigate the number of women involved in the state affairs.

Target 5.1.2 (see Table 2) focuses on inactive population due to family responsibilities (20-64 years), covering citizens that are not actively looking for a job, neither employed nor unemployed and are not considered in the labour force.

Table 2: Inactive population due to family responsibilities (20-64 years)



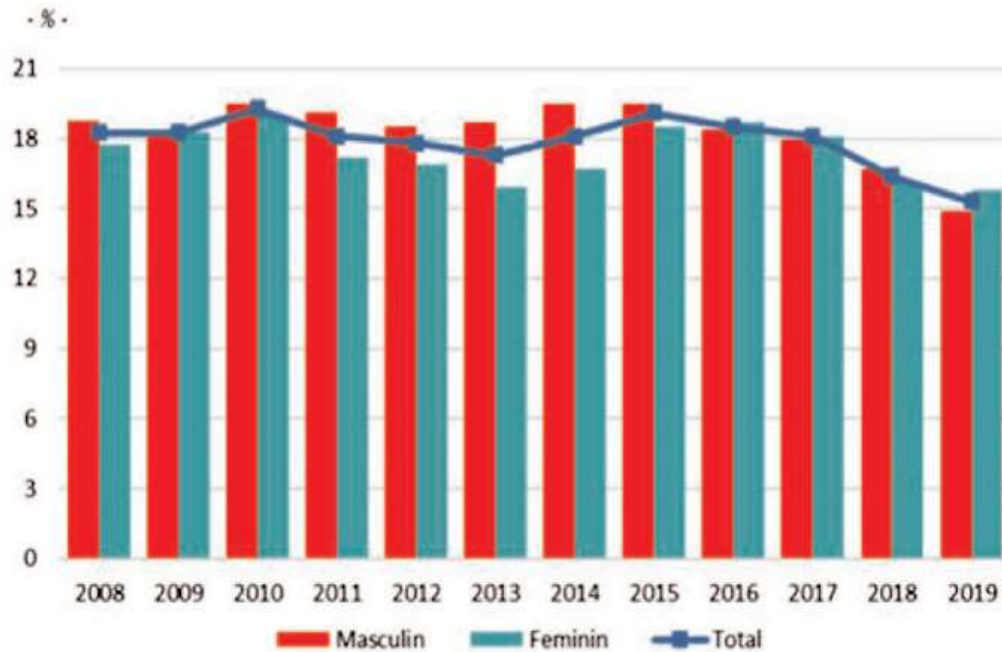
Source: Government of Romania (2020, p. 65)

Throughout 2011-2019 there has been a considerable gap between women and men in this position (almost 30% differences), due to women still being seen as being the main caretaker in terms of childcare and housework responsibilities. The strategy mentions the OUG 111/2010 as a measure meant to ease the process of men opting for parental and childcare leave. However, the data they provide clearly shows that this law didn’t have much of an impact on reducing the gap. The correlated UN target in this regard (5.4) states that one should „Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate”. According to what we have previously presented, Romania indeed acknowledges the existence of an ongoing gap and the lack of properly implementing this target, however fails to provide proper instruments on how to take action and provide real positive change.

From this point onwards, the remaining factors tend to focus on how are gender issues tackled in the educational system (except for target 5.5.1 on sexual violence, which we will discuss later).

Target 5.4.1 (see Table 3) focuses on early school dropout rates for people between 18-24, with low educational level and from NEET category (not in education, employment or training), with focus on gender.

Table 3: Early school dropout rates for people between 18-24 on sex indicator



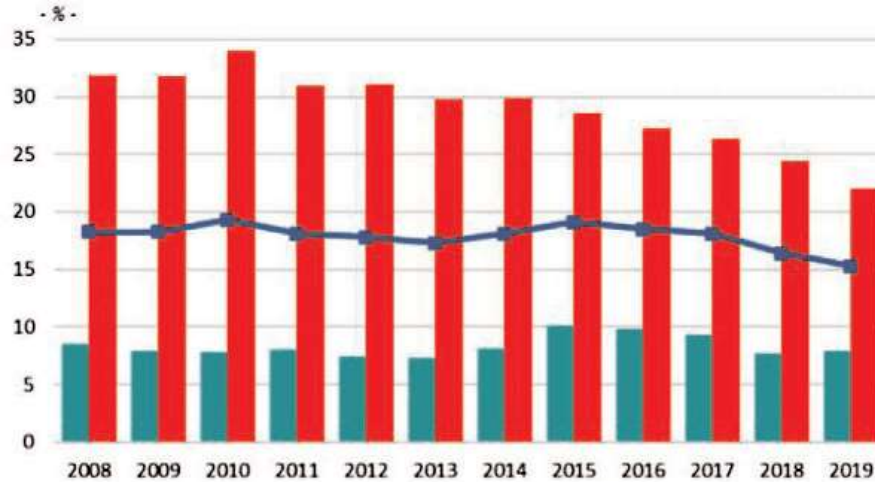
Source: Government of Romania (2020, p. 66)

The data collected for 2008-2019 proved low gender disparity in terms of school dropout, the majority varying throughout years between men and women. Among the determining factors of early school leaving are the low household income that contributes to a financial constraint in facing the collateral costs of education, the low territorial accessibility in isolated areas, especially in rural areas, the low level of training of the parents as well as parents going to work abroad.

There are certain issues we believe need to be pointed out regarding this target, one of them being the lack of a more in-depth analysis regarding the stage when the abandonment happens (primary school, middle school, high school, university etc.). We believe this to be relevant information in order to further provide any proper solutions to this abandonment: are girls abandoning school earlier than boys or vice-versa? Does this abandonment usually tend to happen before a national exam? How many girls and boys abandoning school possess the minimum literacy and mathematics skills? The strategy does not mention the need to create certain funds or aids meant to help sustain those in the educational process. It doesn't focus its strategy on vulnerable groups and also counts the category as a whole, which is an unfortunate choice. For example, can we create a single category for adults who abandoned high school with those who never got the chance to go to school in the first place? We believe each category requires individual focus regarding its needs and problems. Another concern is that one should look at the current occupation of the girls and boys abandoning school as we may again witness a great gap between girls staying at home, becoming mothers at young age, being in charge of the housework and boys trying to make a living through various low-income job activities.

The target 5.4.2 (see Table 4) looks at the same situation but through the factor of residency, rural versus urban. Between 2008-2019, the data shows great disparities between those two, between 5%-10% for urban areas and 26%-34% for rural areas.

Table 4: Early school dropout rates for people between 18-24 on residency indicator, rural versus urban

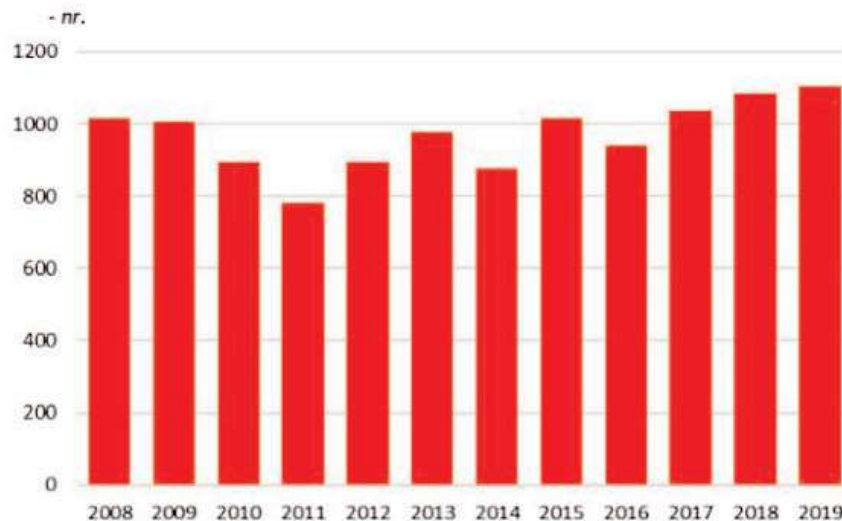


Source: Government of Romania (2020, p. 68)

This time, the issue with this data is that it doesn't mention at all the gender criteria for the data collected. It would be useful to further analyse both the rural and urban areas in terms of gender disparities for school drop-out so as to be able to create further strategies for competing with those worrying numbers.

Last but not least, the final target that the Romanian national strategy is focusing on in relation with the gender equality SDG is the number of rape cases registered between 2008-2019 (see Table 5).

Table 5: Number of rape crimes (solved / denied to the Prosecutor's Office) 2008-2019



Source: Government of Romania (2020, p. 69)

As for the past 4 years, rape cases have been increasing, the strategy quotes „Monitoring the achievement of the sustainable development objectives regarding combating sexual abuse and the effectiveness of the campaigns carried out to achieve this objective is carried out by analysing the number of rape crimes registered in a certain period”. Apart from the collected data, the strategy does not propose any further solutions to reduce those numbers. What can be done in order to prevent and protect the possible victims? Or what does the law say and actually do for victims of rape cases that end up unreported due to the stigma? What are the authorities doing in the case of marital rape? We are not necessarily implying that the current Romanian framework does not already have certain mechanisms related to the questions raised but we are rather trying to indicate that the current strategy lacks in pointing them out or providing ideas for further initiatives that can be done. Another issue would be that this target covers just a small amount of data from the UN strategy, as the target 5.2 states the „Elimination of all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation”. Apart from rape, there are other factors that need to be analysed, such as various forms of sexual harassment happening in numerous environments (school, workplace, home environment etc.), forced sexual labour and so on.

Other targets in the UN strategy still remain uncovered by the Romanian one, such as the focus on reproductive healthcare, as specified by target 5.6 meant to „Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programmed of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences”.

On 6th March 2020, The UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls official visit to Romania shared its first discoveries regarding the progress assessed in achieving gender equality.

The preliminary observations revealed great concerns regarding „trafficking in women and girls; domestic and sexual violence; forced marriage; early marriage; teenage pregnancies and consequent school drop out of girls prevalent in rural areas“ while also stating that “Roma girls are especially at a higher risk of facing those problems and are subjected to racial prejudices in addition to poverty and social exclusion” (UN 2020).

As the experts also pointed out, Romania does currently possess a solid legislative framework but the final end of proper implementation is definitory in providing real improvement. Some of the issues identified were „the frequent change in government, persistence of gender stereotyping and high level of poverty, particularly in rural areas”.

What can be done? The first recommendation received from the UN experts would be prioritizing the provision of temporary protection orders as a defence mechanism for combating trafficking and sexual violence. The Government should also provide further services and support for the victims.

Addressing gender stereotypes should also be prioritised on the agenda, as the Romanian context could make good use of the civil society actors working towards closing the gender gap in terms of respecting and protecting individuals’ rights. This is why the Government needs to make good use of its experts, provide proper funding and infrastructure and efficiently include them in the designing, planning and monitoring stage of future public policies and programmes, as the Working Group pointed out.

To conclude this section, Romania has proved the wish to align itself with the international trends and initiatives on gender equality, although is yet to fully achieve what it intended. The

next section is focusing more on what are the fields that Romania needs to work on and how the current issues are influencing the educational system of the future generations to come.

#### **4. Case study: Romania's Curricula on Gender Equality**

As previously mentioned in this paper, the Istanbul Convention, also known as the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, is a legally binding international treaty, to which Romania is part of, after signing in 2014 and ratifying it in 2016.

However, despite this fact, little has been done in the field of improving gender equality, be it in general or particularly in education, ever since. The GREVIO (Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence) report for 2022 on Romania provides clear information on how actions of the Romanian Government have succeeded, or not, in implementing the legislative package for the harmonisation of the national legislation with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, which includes the integration of gender equality and gender-based violence at all levels of the education system. Although the report states that “the NAEO (National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men) has taken several steps to integrate educational content promoting gender equality at different levels, such as the creation of a guide for gender mainstreaming in preschool education and training programs on gender equality for teachers”, it also acknowledges that “gender studies remain underdeveloped in Romania and topics related to equality between men and women are often marginalised and approached fragmentally” (EIGE, 2022b).

Moreover, the Gender Equality Index, which measures progress in gender equality for all member states, ranks Romania 26<sup>th</sup> for 2022, which is only second place to last, with only Greece scoring less. With a focus on Covid-19 for the said year, the report states that “Child-care was very unevenly distributed between women and men”, “Women were less likely than men to rely on external support with childcare” and “Household work fell primarily on women”. This only comes as a reminder that girls' education in Romania is often in jeopardy – particularly young women in rural areas – as they are often forced to drop out of school in order to better support their families within the household. In the primary school years, between the ages of seven and 10, only 87 percent of Romanian girls are enrolled in school (World Bank, 2020).

A lack of education from an early age creates a ripple effect felt throughout these young women's lives. Many women are unable to complete the education required for even low-paying professional jobs, effectively holding them in a state of dependency throughout their lives, while also limiting their ability to contribute to the national economy.

In Romania, 75% of education staff is female and the greatest gap is found in pre-school and primary education where there are hardly any men involved: under 1% male staff in pre-school and under 10% male staff in primary education, according to data published by the Ministry of Education in its annual report regarding education in Romania (Ministerul Educației, 2022a). It is not only the case of Romania: at European level, in pre-school education, 4,9% of staff are men. The opposite type of imbalance is among STEM teaching staff, where we continue to find few female teachers. Gender segregation in education is a persistent challenge, one that causes serious stagnation of gender equality in the realm of learning (Proca& Gall, 2018). An indicator used by EIGE is the number of students that choose a profile of

study related to arts and humanities – where the future education labour force is trained: the gap recorded in Romania is 30% female students versus 17% male students in humanities (EIGE, 2022a).

Despite having an overwhelming number of women in the education system, when speaking about leadership positions, we still encounter teachers and educators that feel that in their sector it is normal for men to occupy leadership positions. The glass ceiling effect that prevents women from accessing decision making is therefore present even in a sector that is overwhelmingly female (Proca & Gall, 2018).

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges in helping students overcome the limitation of gender stereotypes comes from the fact that practice often contradicts the message for equality in the school setting. So a fundamental question remains: how do we work with education staff to make schools welcome equality as a daily reality, not just a school-text lesson?

Moving forward, we will first see how learning objectives are set for SDG 5 – Gender Equality, as defined by UNESCO in their “Education for Sustainable Development Goals: learning objectives” paper, and oppose them to what is currently found in the school curricula for all ages in Romania.

Firstly, the learning objectives are divided into Cognitive, Socio-emotional and Behavioural, and provide a meaningful insight into what gender equality should be seen and understood as – with references to not only gender discrimination, violence and inequality, but also reproductive rights, culture, education, critical thinking etc.

The Cognitive learning objectives set by UNESCO are (UNESCO, 2017):

1. “The learner understands the concept of gender, gender equality and gender discrimination and knows about all forms of gender discrimination, violence and inequality (e.g. harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, honour killings and child marriage, unequal employment opportunities and pay, language construction, traditional gender roles, gendered impact of natural hazards) and understands the current and historical causes of gender inequality.”

2. “The learner understands the basic rights of women and girls, including their right to freedom from exploitation and violence and their reproductive rights.”

3. “The learner understands levels of gender equality within their own country and culture in comparison to global norms (while respecting cultural sensitivity), including the intersectionality of gender with other social categories such as ability, religion and race.”

4. “The learner knows the opportunities and benefits provided by full gender equality and participation in legislation and governance, including public budget allocation, the labour market and public and private decision-making.”

5. “The learner understands the role of education, enabling technology and legislation in empowering and ensuring the full participation of all genders.”

The Socio-emotional learning objectives are defined as follows (UNESCO, 2017):

1. “The learner is able to recognize and question traditional perception of gender roles in a critical approach, while respecting cultural sensitivity.”

2. “The learner is able to identify and speak up against all forms of gender discrimination and debate the benefits of full empowerment of all genders.”

3. “The learner is able to connect with others who work to end gender discrimination and violence, empower those who may still be disempowered and promote respect and full equality on all levels.”



4. “The learner is able to reflect on their own gender identity and gender roles.”
5. “The learner is able to feel empathy and solidarity with those who differ from personal or community gender expectations and roles.”

And lastly, the Behavioural learning objectives are set as (UNESCO, 2017):

1. “The learner is able to take the measure of their surroundings to empower themselves or others who are discriminated against because of their gender.”
2. “The learner is able to evaluate, participate in and influence decision-making about gender equality and participation.”
3. “The learner is able to support others in developing empathy across genders and breaking down gender discrimination and violence.”
4. “The learner is able to observe and identify gender discrimination.”
5. “The learner is able to plan, implement, support and evaluate strategies for gender equality.”

Having all of the above in mind, we will now analyse the school curricula in Romania for all ages, starting with preschool.

The preschool curriculum in Romania is divided into 5 main experiential domains, for which different learning objectives and desirable behaviours have also been set: Language and communication, Sciences, Humans and society, Aesthetic and Creative, Psychomotor. However, no specific references to gender or equality are made, but there are some references to tolerance and diversity, found under the Humans and Society domain. In terms of learning objectives, these are set as: to know and respect the rules necessary for integration into social life, as well as personal security rules, to adapt their own behaviour to the requirements of the group in which they live (family, kindergarten, playgroup), to live in healthy and peaceful relationships with those around, manifesting positive emotional states, friendship, tolerance, harmony, self-control (Ministerul Educației, Cercetării și Tineretului, 2019).

The desirable behaviours set in the said curriculum mention: “interacts equally with all the children in the community, regardless of gender, language spoken, ethnicity or performance (children with special needs); shows tolerant attitudes towards other children who belong to different religious groups and minorities; accepts the diversity of opinions and attitudes” (Ministerul Educației, Cercetării și Tineretului, 2019).

So, while no specific gender issues are addressed, there are some steps made towards acceptance, inclusion, tolerance and diversity, which would set a good pace for future learning years.

However, there are no references whatsoever related to the gender equality perspective in the curriculum for elementary education (primary school), which means there is a major step taken backwards. Instead of strengthening the previously acquired knowledge and taking advantage of the cognitive importance of the formative years, the Romanian education system simply forgets about them, possibly due to growing resistance to education on sexuality and the stigmatisation of those partaking in it.

Moving forward, in the curriculum for lower secondary school (gymnasium), there are a few references to gender within the subject called counselling and personal development, where it is actually stated, in Chapter 4, called “Making decisions related to the continuation of studies and career by capitalizing on information about oneself, education and occupations” (Ministerul Educației, 2022b), that the gender dimension influences your career choice, with the exact statement being that “developing a mental map, which describes, starting from personal aspirations and the gender dimension in education, the option for a certain career and the

educational path that must be followed in order for this option to be realized”. The gender dimension is mentioned twice in this particular curriculum, with the same connotation – that it (might) influence(s) your education and career choice (Ministerul Educației Naționale, 2017).

However, the curriculum for counselling and guidance for the same age group (5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade) admits that “gender stereotypes in career planning” exist, and recommends “group discussions, on the topic of gender issues in career development” (Ministerul Educației, 2022b).

There is also one non-mandatory subject, called “Skills for teenage years”, which notably makes no reference to gender equality or discrimination based on gender, dismissing the existence of this issue amongst youngsters.

In the School Chosen curricula, there are various options, including one called “Ready for life” – in their recommendations for the 8<sup>th</sup> graders, there is a faint reference to gender stereotypes: “Presentation of gender stereotypes and prejudices (e.g. girls are whiny, boys are bullies, etc.) and analysing them in groups, capitalizing on personal experiences” (Ministerul Educației, 2022b).

The high-school curriculum is the first one to make a reference to gender equality, in the curriculum for Counselling and guidance, which recommends that contents include “Equal opportunities in career development – the gender dimension in career development and planning; gender stereotypes as barriers in career options.”

There is also one curriculum called “Adolescence and self-knowledge”, that recommends the following contents: Development of gender characteristics (feminine characteristics – male characteristics; manifestations of gender in culture, art, science; human society, product of harmony and complementarity between the two genders); Marriage and family, realisations of authentic love (intimacy of marriage; care and responsibilities towards husband/wife and in family life; personal fulfilment through marriage, formalisation of shared love); Deciphering messages! (types of language – verbal, nonverbal and paraverbal in different social and cultural contexts; gender specificities in communication; understanding communication filters in shaping messages, rules of correct communication; verbal, body language and the use of voice in communication, influencing and persuasion).

This brief analysis of school curricula, as seen on the official site of the Ministry of Education, seems to be supporting the conclusion of the GREVIO 2022 report on Romanian education: “strongly encourages the Romanian authorities to step up their efforts to promote, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners, the principles of equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships and the right to personal integrity, and to ensure information on the different forms of gender-based violence against women, in formal curriculums and at all levels of education. This includes the need to address in particular forced marriage and sexual violence by focusing on the right to personal integrity and unequal power relations between women and men” (EIGE, 2022b).

Additionally, NGOs report that while there are minimum standards set by the Ministry of Education for the teaching of sexuality education, and a guide created for teachers for the sexuality education module of the health education curriculums, these have not been updated for over 10 years and do not cover issues such as consent and sexual violence. Furthermore, health education is not mandatory and there is a low participation rate among students (6% for the 2014-2015 school year). Training for teachers on sexuality education is not mandatory, nor is the quality of health education evaluated at any level.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

As we have shown in the previous chapters, there is serious national and international concern when it comes to implementing the provisions of international commitments in terms of gender equality. Numerous pervasive challenges impede the transition from consensus on the implementation of specific actions and policies to the actual realisation of tangible outcomes on the field, as exemplified in the context of Romania.

International agreements such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Istanbul Convention and the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Strategies paved the way for the current landscape in terms of gender equality policies. While the nations participating in these international accords acted in good faith, the majority of them fell short of attaining their respective targets. Instead of recurrently establishing new objectives that incorporate previously unfulfilled commitments, it may be prudent to concentrate efforts on fulfilling the existing pledges.

Despite Romania's demonstrated commitment to formulate and enact a national strategy addressing gender equality, the state encounters challenges in comprehensively gathering pertinent data on the matter and in designing appropriate solutions and remedies in line with the identified concerns. Although it fares well in some aspects, such as the low pay gap and participation on the labour market of males and females, examples such as these are merely consequences of the former regime, rather than results of implemented policies.

Hence, it is evident that Romania still has significant strides to make in attaining comprehensive gender equality. Education, therefore, should be regarded as the fundamental cornerstone, with several possible solutions to be considered from this perspective. From what we have seen, Romania's education system and overall national policies in terms of gender equality exhibit a mixed landscape. On one hand, there have been strides towards gender parity in access to education and enrolment rates, with both girls and boys having relatively equal opportunities to attend school and pursue education. However, challenges persist in achieving true gender equality within the educational framework and the wider social framework, as disparities emerge in certain areas, such as representation in STEM fields, where women are underrepresented. Additionally, traditional gender stereotypes and societal expectations may subtly influence educational choices and career paths; unfortunately, such biases are still present in the school curricula in Romania, albeit only few teachers do realise this.

To start with, the inclusion of gender-sensitive content is crucial. Curriculum developers should actively integrate content that addresses gender issues, challenges stereotypes, and highlights the contributions of women in various fields. This can be achieved by incorporating literature, historical events, and scientific achievements that reflect diverse perspectives and accentuate the role of women in the development of various fields.

Secondly, efforts should be made to introduce students to a diverse range of role models, including both men and women, from various backgrounds and professions, and thus challenging traditional gender norms and providing more diverse inspiration for students.

Thirdly, sexual and reproductive health education should become comprehensive, emphasising informed decision-making, consent, and mutual respect, while also being inclusive and free from gender biases.

Moreover, as our youth is growing and developing under the auspices of fake news and hate culture, critical thinking and media literacy are utterly important. It could provide students

with the ability to critically analyse media representations of gender, which often reinforce stereotypes, while also contributing to the mental health of a whole generation, more prone to abuse and bullying than ever before in human history.

Inclusive language use is another tool to be considered, because it mainly helps create an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and accepted. Therefore, teachers should not only be encouraged to use inclusive language that acknowledges and respects all gender identities, but also receive training on gender-sensitive pedagogy, which equips them with the skills to create inclusive classrooms and address gender-related issues. Furthermore, regular assessments of curricula and teaching practices should be conducted to identify and rectify any gender biases or gaps in the educational system.

Addressing gender-based violence and bullying is also important, and school curricula should include education on healthy relationships, consent, and strategies for preventing and addressing gender-based violence and bullying.

When it comes to career guidance and counselling, schools should provide comprehensive career guidance that encourages students to pursue their interests and talents, regardless of gender, and this includes actively promoting STEM fields to girls.

Last, but not least, engaging parents and communities in discussions about gender equality is vital, as it helps create a supportive environment both in and outside of school, can lead to better understanding of gender equality notions inside families, helps reinforce the mandatory school-family-community partnership and might also provide additional, unexpected benefits such as gender equality education for the elder.

By implementing these measures, Romania could make significant progress towards a more equitable and inclusive education system that empowers all students, regardless of their gender, to thrive on a personal, academic and professional level.

We acknowledge the efforts that have been made to integrate gender-sensitive perspectives into curricula, although this was done more by fostering an inclusive educational environment and less by promoting awareness of gender issues. Nonetheless, further steps are needed to address gender-based discrimination, improve representation in all academic disciplines, and ensure that educational policies and practices are conducive to a truly equitable learning experience for all students, regardless of gender.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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