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GENDER EQUALITY

Conditions for Ensuring Gender Equality in Education

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INTRODUCTION

Efforts to create equal opportunities for women and men in society are linked to the need and desire to assure the use and sustainable development of the 'maximum human potential', which makes it necessary to create a context in which opportunities and rights are equal, from equal access to high-quality education to access to decision-making positions in society, which would implicitly mean the recognition of women's abilities, contributing to their empowerment (Kaltenborn *et al.*, 2020). The involvement of various countries in the fight for equal gender rights meant the undertaking of efforts to implement measures designed to provide equal rights to education for men and women, the non-compliance of which is punished worldwide, being legislated through various treaties (Subrahmanian, 2005).

Several international documents have expressed concern and called for action to improve girls' access to primary education. Some of these documents are the Education for All (EFA) drafted by UNESCO in 1990 and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2014) drafted with a view to providing universal access to education given numerous gender differences. According to the conclusions of these documents, although access to education has improved for girls, they continue to be subject to discrimination both in school and later in life, when entering the labor market. Empirical research has shown that ensuring equal access to education is an absolute must for assuring gender equality, although it is not sufficient (Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016). For instance, in OECD countries, boys are much more likely to drop out of school, 15-year-olds have poorer results than their female counterparts, girls perform worse in mathematics and, consequently, attend less higher education programs in areas such as engineering, computers and sciences (OECD & PISA, 2015). This may be accounted for by the way in which equality is understood (often only as access to education), but also by certain structural causes that materialize both in the educational system and in the other subsystems (family, labor market, political representation etc.) that precede and succeed the educational one. Among these structural causes, the most important in terms of their consequences are the social construction of gender and the social distribution of power.

The success of efforts to implement gender equality is due to several factors that are not strictly limited to education, which turns the effectiveness of gender equality policies and interventions into a complex action, involving a broad framework that also includes aspects that contribute to the development and perpetuation of gender differences in society (Subrahmanian, 2005). The educational system plays a major role in this effort as it is the one that creates, multiplies, strengthens and perpetuates inequalities, including gender inequalities. Therefore, we will consider school as the main place of manifestation of gender (in)equality and we will focus on finding solutions that can be implemented. In terms of gender equality, school is not only important by itself, but also by the fact that it is at the crossroads of practices, rules, values and currents in society.

TERMINOLOGY CLARIFICATIONS

Equality and Parity

Gender equality and parity are major international goals, with gender parity being considered 'the first step towards gender equality in and through education' (Wilson, 2004, p. 2), its meaning being the right to access and participate in education, on the one hand, and raising awareness of gender influences in the educational environment, on the other hand, as well as meaningful educational outcomes able to link equality in education to more general issues related to gender rights. Specifically, the goals listed in EFA's (Education for All) 2000 Dakar Framework for Action aimed to 'eliminate gender disparities by 2005' and to 'achieve gender equality by 2015' (Subrahmanian, 2005; UNESCO, 2000). However, the persistent difficulties in achieving these goals have underlined the complexity of the factors that contribute to the development and persistence of gender differences at the social level, which requires awareness of the need for a broader approach to the phenomena related to parity and equality, that would go beyond the boundaries of primary and secondary education.

Gender equality means that both men and women have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities, and have equal power to influence their lives and contribute to economic, social, cultural, and political development (Unterhalter *et al.*, 2019). At a first glance, the persistence of inequalities in and out of school would lie in the terminological overlap and equivalence between equality and parity, but 'gender parity and equality are different things' (UNESCO, 2003). Parity consists in ensuring equal numerical representation of girls and boys when enrolling them in school (Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015); is a count, a numerical expression used to ensure equal representation in a particular context.

UN documents themselves include indicators that seem to equate gender equality with parity. For instance, the Beijing Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women (United Nations, 1995) sets out four indicators of Goal 3 that relate to women, two of which directly concern education: the ratio of girls to boys at all levels of education; the ratio of women to men aged 15-24; the share of women working in paid jobs in the non-agricultural sector; the share of seats held by women in national parliaments.

Parity remains a useful means of checking and assuring the right to education through access, but it is not enough. Equating equality with parity, with the numerical, quantitative aspects of school access narrows the analysis and has led to some questionable conclusions that ignore deeper aspects of gender relations. For example, by assuring parity indicators, some countries argue that they are assuring equality between girls and boys in school, although it is clear that this objective is far from being met. Equating access with equality in education makes us lose sight of important elements related to quality in education and what follows after its completion, such as (Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015):

– Quality of curricula;
– Impact of curricula on career choices;
– Inequalities on the labor market;
– Inequalities in other fields of education;
– Salary differences between men and women;
– Share of women in entrepreneurship and business management;
– Physical and sexual violence against girls and women.

Equality through parity reflects a 'formal' equality in terms of access and participation in education that continues to cover deep inequalities and inequities that are thus ignored. The parity criterion says nothing, for example, about the relationships that are established between girls and

boys inside the school (Subrahmanian, 2005) but also about adequate learning opportunities, fair treatment in school and equal employment opportunities (Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015).

Usually, in EU countries, for instance, more women than men reach the tertiary level of education (30.2% compared to 26.5% in 2020 according to Eurostat), but this indicator says nothing about the quality of higher education acquired by men and women, or about their curricula and about their impact on career options, gender inequality in the labor market, gender imbalances in work outside the market, or about inequalities in different fields of education (Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015). If we were to consider this indicator alone, we would be tempted to say that women are actually overrepresented at this level of education. On the other hand, there is data showing that in OECD countries women are underrepresented in the fields of mathematics, physics and computer science. For instance, in 2012, 14% of girls first enrolling in higher education chose science-related fields, compared to 39% of boys (OECD & PISA, 2015), a trend that continues nowadays (*Table 5*). This is an example of how implemented parity, although real, perpetuates deeper inequalities even in countries with a high level of development.

Focusing attention on gender and education only in terms of access, participation and graduation rates for boys and girls shows little, however, about how, for example, social constructions of gender limit the capacity of education to cause critical transformations in terms of gender justice worldwide. There is thus a need to overcome this eminently quantitative level and to approach on a deeper level the way gender equality may be achieved.

The complexity of the problems related to assuring a non-discriminatory life for all members of society lies in the difficulty of identifying and operationalizing the concepts that contribute to the persistence of inequality, in addition to the factors that cause it.

Equality and Equity

If parity is an imperfect indicator in assessing gender equality in education, then what would be the best approach? Although insufficient, parity is necessary and it should be accompanied by the concept of equity, according to which 'everyone receives what they need to achieve equality' (Baily, 2015: 832). In other words, for all (the children) to start from the same point - i.e., equality - they need support to start from the same point. Gender equality is an issue related to the observance of human rights, regardless of gender, while equality of opportunity refers to the absence of barriers based on gender criteria, more or less explicit, in terms of economic, political and social participation (EIGE, 2016), which goals are rather difficult to achieve, given the need to correct a series of deeply rooted social phenomena, which are not easy to identify.

Likewise, equal treatment aims to eliminate discrimination based on gender criteria derived from pregnancy and maternity, and gender wage disparity, in the sense that there are no differences in gross income influenced by the gender of employees. All this suggests a gender integrative approach, which refers to the measures necessary to achieve the desired gender equality and to anticipate the effects of certain specific legislative measures, while also emphasizing the importance of gender stereotypes, considered to be an important element in the social generation of some 'normalizing' attitudes and behaviors, by validating or invalidating social identity in terms of belonging to one gender or another (Constantin *et al.*, 2019).

Formally, gender equity is a broader concept that includes gender equality, fairness and justice in terms of both the benefits and needs of girls/women and boys/men (Unterhalter *et al.*, 2019). Achieving gender equity requires recognizing that women and men start from different vantage points and are constrained in different ways (Subrahmanian, 2005). Substantive equality (equity) must take into account the differences, which are mainly related to the biological features and the socially constructed disadvantages of women versus men (p. 397). Specifically, equity refers to the fair, gender-equitable distribution of responsibilities, resources and power. The concept recognizes that men and women typically have different needs, responsibilities, access to resources

and decision-making powers. These differences need to be identified, discussed and confronted, especially when they cause disadvantages for women or when they are not compliant with human rights and justice standards (Baily, 2015: 831).
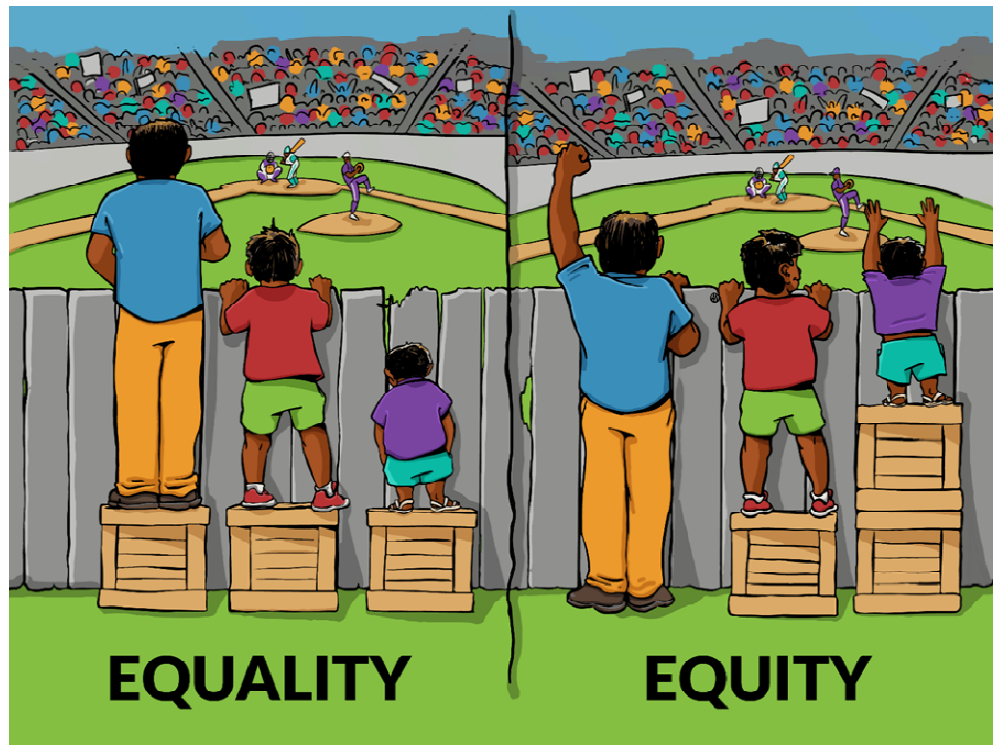
Figure 1. Equality and Equity

Differences and inequalities are an old problem and, in the case of pupils and students, they are not only present in schools. In order to achieve equity, it is necessary to know and subsequently remove the grounded institutional legislative barriers and historical disadvantages that hinder existing opportunities, access to and use of resources, services and decision-making power for both sexes (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2007; Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015). Equity ultimately means that each individual, regardless of sex, race, social origin etc. should be able to choose their development paths and pursue the desired results. Achieving this goal may require some temporary measures to compensate for some disadvantages that have affected girls over time (Unterhalter *et al.*, 2019), and also the amendment of some social standards according to which men and women have unequal contributions to the development of society and, hence, unequal access to benefits (UNESCO, 2003).

Empowerment

The language used in the education system, the texts that are studied in school, as well as the different gender treatment of girls and boys reinforce gender stereotypes, therefore one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) deals with gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls being considered vital by the United Nations (2015) (Kaltenborn *et al.*, 2020).

Therefore, it makes sense to approach the concept of empowerment, which means giving power to someone, although in a broader sense it refers to highlighting aspects that refer to one's inner strength, the recognition of which by others and by the individual him/herself validates certain

skills, thus being related to agency, as the ability to choose actions that reinforce identities associated with preferred life stories (Camargo-Borges & McNamee, 2020). If we refer to gender-related behavioral prescriptions, being a woman means showing sensitivity, which is virtually linked to gender identity and which also validates its reciprocal, according to which showing sensitivity means belonging to the female gender. We could therefore consider that women need the social validation of their abilities to perform outside the family as well, to be judged and understood outside the concept of gender, through the actual validation of their social actions, which, in relation with their awareness, contribute to agency formation, which women need to strengthen their empowerment process.

The concept of empowerment is related to what narrative therapy calls reclaiming the authorship of one's own life (*re-authoring life*[1]) (Besley, 2001), and if we refer to life governed by gender-modulated social discourses, regaining the right to one's own life may refer to dismissing social discourses and stereotypes that govern life through gender-based behavioral and attitudinal prescriptions. This approach guides the concept of gender from the modernist vision, which divides people into fixed predetermined categories, towards more flexibility, as social constructionism suggests that gender is the result of the action of social vectors, which associate certain personality traits, attitudes and behaviors with belonging to a gender category or another. These ideas are consistent with studies that support the influence of social discourses on the perception of gender, which promote inequalities when they validate or invalidate certain actions according to gender, thus creating unequal power relations between genders.

The concept of empowerment is explained by understanding the discursive relations of power, which build a new identity story, descriptively richer, by linking 'action' and consciousness (Carey & Russel, 2003), by fueling the inner power that helps the individual to choose those actions that reinforce the 'preferred identity story' (Carey&Russell, 2003), which in the case of gender-related descriptions contribute to the reinforcement of the preferred gender identity. In short, a woman will feel like a woman by making the choices that fit the discursive description of the female gender as a person with a certain degree of sensitivity and emotivity, while being a man is associated with more pragmatism, more toughness.

Understanding the concept of empowerment through that of agency makes it necessary to clarify the meaning of the latter, which is a determining factor of one's own actions, an exercise of power (Rappaport, 1995; Somers, 1994) underlying both personal and community stories, where the individual plays the role of social modeler in his/her own story and, at the same time, of co-constructor of community stories (Rappaport, 1995), these ideas being promoted by social constructionism. Therefore, the concept of empowerment, translated as the empowerment of women, is not about obtaining power in relation to the male gender, but about contributing, through social actions, to regaining confidence in their own abilities by controlling the effects of gender stereotypes, which, acting as an invisible power, in addition to limiting access to various forms of education, decision-making functions etc., diminish the individual potential of women, a phenomenon explained by Eccles *et al.* (1990) through self-fulfilling prophecies.

Coming back to the idea of empowerment, the model suggested by Eccles *et al.* as early as 1990 could explain the women's lack of confidence in their own abilities, in relation to gender stereotypes, which seem to shape the development of certain abilities depending on child gender and on the manner in which parents invest them with confidence, bearing in mind that parental influences are accompanied by school influences, which materialize in various attitudinal models or in what is transmitted unconsciously, as a social discourse, a concept that has been called the hidden curriculum.

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[1] In English in the original.

Empowerment, in our case women's, is defined as 'improving the ability of women to access components of development - particularly those related to health, education, gaining opportunities, rights and political participation' (Duflo, 2012: 1053). In the case of children and adolescents, focus is placed on how this concept can be applied in education, a field in which early intervention is possible and in which, as shown above, access alone is insufficient. Education and school are not meant solely to transmit information but also values and principles, including equality and equity, regardless of gender. Murphy-Graham & Lloyd (2016) developed a model for understanding and supporting the empowerment of adolescent girls in school, based on several researches in this area. Here are the prerequisites for the development of such a model, in fact for facilitating girls' access to education:

− Providing a learning friendly environment;
− Development of values (dignity and equality);
− Learning by doing: directly involving teachers and students in experiences that facilitate reflection and increase their ability to critically analyze and contribute to the well-being of the community.

These prerequisites provide the support for educational content (curriculum) that develops four key skills: critical thinking and knowledge acquisition, social skills, personal skills, productive skills (developing students' skills to produce, generate and create, both in the social and in the economic fields). The components of this model are summarized in *Table 1*.

Prerequisites: providing a learning friendly environment, development of values (dignity and equality), learning by doing			
Critical thinking and learning (include without limitation):	Personal skills	Social skills	Productive skills
- Literacy and communication (including multilingualism) - Social studies - Arithmetic and mathematics - Science and technology	- Self-knowledge (identification of strengths and weaknesses, sexuality) - Spirituality (encouraging examination of spiritual life, experiences that generate spiritual experiences) - Self-care (physical health and nutrition, sexual health) - Personal development (includes traits such as emotional awareness, resilience, self-protection, perseverance)	- Development of pro-social and moral values and respect for human rights - Developing friendships and a sense of social connectedness - Ability to communicate, negotiate and work productively with others - Understanding social systems and local and global issues that influence the well-being of one's self and of others	- Ability to generate, create, produce (both in the economic and social fields) - The economic field may include: financial literacy, entrepreneurial education, technical skills and environmental management - The social field may include: organizing public awareness raising campaigns, community development actions, organizational and mobilization skills, interpersonal skills

Source: Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016: 565

Table 1. Levels of empowerment support through education

LEGISLATION AND INSIGHTS INTO THE NATIONAL STRATEGY IN THE FIELD OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN AND MEN

Introductory Notes on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women

This section will attempt a threefold approach to this sensitive matter, which is, for now, a goal difficult to achieve (in Romanian society and in other societies as well), due to the conservative mentality of society as a whole, and especially of the decision-makers in various fields of public life and on different levels (public administration representatives - central and local -, public or private employers, even teaching staff from all education cycles etc.). This threefold approach refers to the manner in which national law, on the one hand, and European and ultimately UN law, on the other hand, have integrated the standards and requirements that govern the field of gender equality and the undifferentiated and non-discriminatory treatment of women and men.

However, since Romania has irreversibly set off on the road of the immutable specific democratic values of the 'rule of law', the principles of 'equal opportunities' and 'undifferentiated and non-discriminatory treatment of women and men' must be regarded as fundamental principles in the generous field of fundamental human rights and freedoms.

Likewise, the elimination of gender inequities (de facto and de jure), unjustly based on the apparent difference in power (which is measured in a crude and primitive way), is the key to the emancipation of women (in the generic sense) and placing them in their natural and specific place and role. This is basically the practical ultimate goal of some legal requirements and principles, which are no longer abstract (even demagogical, sometimes), but put into practice in their immediate reality.

Thus, the principles of 'equal opportunities' and 'undifferentiated and non-discriminatory treatment of women and men' must be concretely and fully manifested at all levels of contemporary Romanian society, which must clearly, explicitly, and also concretely and practically show its flexibility and willingness to improve continuously, including in this area.

For the application of these principles and for the achievement of these goals, bodies and institutions have been established in our country, and we will list hereunder some of the most representative in this matter, with full details about their establishment, organization and operation (by mentioning, first of all, the normative acts that govern them). Thus, we should begin by mentioning the *National Committee for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (CONES)*, the organization and operation of which were approved by the Government of Romania by Decision no. 933 of 27 November 2013, the National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (ANES), established and organized by the Government of Romania by Decision no. 177 of 23 March 2016 and its territorial structures, the *County Committees and the Bucharest Committee for Equal Opportunities to Women and Men* (the Organization and Operation Regulation of which was approved by the Government of Romania by Decision no. 1 054 of 8 September 2005).

Undoubtedly, *equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men* also refer to the social connections between members of a community, both in public and private sectors. This is also the reason why it is necessary to develop public policies in this field aimed at improving social life in all aspects, at correcting all those attitudes and behaviors that could lead to the marginalization or, worse, the exclusion of people (regardless of gender) and highlighting the advantages of building an inclusive and non-discriminatory society, in which the gender component is an integrative one, so as to achieve the goal of improving the quality of life of all individuals (be them women or men) until the ultimate goal is reached in the matter, namely the elimination of any form and manifestation of discrimination or violence based on gender difference.

After the events of December 1989, more shyly and with a doubtful concreteness at the beginning, then more vigorously, especially with the approach of the preceding moments, culminating with those of the country's accession to the European and Euro-Atlantic bodies, with the two crucial milestones in our recent history - 2004 and 2007 - which set Romanian society on an irreversible and sometimes difficult track towards genuine democracy and the rule of law, with their institutions of force, which represents the unshakable guarantor of the development and especially of the implementation of the concepts of human and citizen rights, in general, and of women, in particular, Romania gradually developed and implemented a package of normative acts, which has undergone a continuous process of improvement.

We will make hereunder a list, which despite not being comprehensive is in any event a very well documented one, of laws regulating this extremely sensitive area in a developing society, which faced tough conservative structures in the not-too-distant past, which were guided by outdated and even archaic concepts.

Please note that, for fluency reasons, as well as in order to ascertain their definite and obvious evolution, we have followed the chronological criterion in the above-mentioned enumeration of significant normative acts that are still in force at the time of this research.

However, in order to evolve as quickly as possible towards a society in which we no longer speak, regardless of level or field, of such discriminations, great emphasis must be placed on education, starting with early education (as early as preschool education received in the extended family) and up to the highest levels and forms of education (undergraduate and postgraduate education). Thus, revolutionary theories were created and implemented in terms of 'gender equality' in the education system.

In Romania, 'equal opportunities' and 'undifferentiated and non-discriminatory treatment of women and men' are currently included in the category of fundamental principles of human and citizen rights, which is only natural under the rule of law, being inserted as such both in the corpus of normative acts in force and in the national public policies.

Representative Normative Acts in the Matter of Equal Opportunities for Men and Women

All the principles listed above are regulated, defined and published especially in *Law no. 202/2002 on equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men*, republished, with later amendments and additions, which is the 'framework law' in this matter and which regulates the rules for passing, supporting and last but not least guaranteeing equal opportunities and fair treatment of women and men in all public domains in Romania.

This normative act also includes the enumeration, definition, mode of operation, implementation and protection of the paradigms and expressions that are true institutions in the field: 'equal opportunities for women and men', '(non)discrimination on the basis of gender', 'direct, indirect discrimination, harassment in general and sexual harassment in particular', 'equal pay for equal work', 'affirmative action', 'multiple discrimination' etc.

For a good and thorough regulation of the legal principles just mentioned, the law includes specific sections in which measures are described regarding the observance of gender equality and non-discriminatory treatment between/of women and men in fields like work, social security, leadership, the right to education etc., in order to eradicate outdated gender-related theories.

Thus, *Law no. 202/2002 on equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men*, with later amendments and additions (hereunder *'Law no. 202/2002'*), is the framework law in this field and its scope is the regulation of the whole package of rules meant to ensure the promotion of the principles of 'equal opportunities' and 'undifferentiated and non-discriminatory

treatment of women and men', with the ultimate goal of completely eliminating discriminatory behaviors based on gender differences, in all public and private sectors in our society.

Article 2 paragraph (2) of this law unequivocally defines 'equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men' as 'considering the different skills, needs and aspirations of men and women, respectively, and their equal treatment'.

Law no. 202/2002, which is the framework law in the field of 'equal opportunities' and 'undifferentiated and non-discriminatory treatment of women and men', *brings about several changes*:

− Terms specific to this matter are defined (in a fairly clear and explicit manner), such as, for example: (1) equal opportunities for women and men; (2) discrimination based on gender, direct / indirect discrimination / harassment / sexual harassment etc.; (3) equal pay for equal work; (4) multiple discrimination etc.
− The framework law on gender equality (structured in distinct sections) also presents, on the one hand, the measures regarding the observance of equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men on the labor market, as concerns their participation in decision-making, education, culture and information, but also the elimination of gender roles and stereotypes, on the other hand.
− Another novelty is the detection and concrete sanctioning of contraventions (with a minimum level of the fine in the net amount of 3000 lei) under the law (the checks are carried out by ITM inspectors specialized in employment and by other authorized staff of the National Council for Discrimination Control - CNDC -), in other abuse cases (education, participation in leadership etc.).

One should also note *Law no. 125 of 7 July 2016* regarding Romania's accession to the European Center for Interdependence and World Solidarity (hereinafter referred to as the Center), created by Resolution (89)14, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 16 November 1989, acknowledged by Resolution (93)51, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 21 October 1993.

The '*European Center for Interdependence and World Solidarity*' (established according to the Resolution (89)14 adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 16 November 1989) aims to develop mechanisms of community cooperation and coordination for the actual involvement of the member states citizens in the new realities generated by globalization, which are increasingly evident. The Center also aims to develop public policies that resonate with the values, principles, and aspirations of the Council of Europe.

One should also note the entire package of normative acts developed and passed mainly through the combined efforts of and supported by the relevant institutions in the field, established both at the national level (CONES and ANES) and at the local level (*County Committees and the Bucharest Committee for Equal Opportunities to Women and Men*), which are aimed at assuring compliance with the commitments made by Romania for the speedy implementation of, among other things, the provisions of the 'Istanbul Convention', of the Commitment no. 1 of the 'UN/UN Women #HeforShe Campaign' and the 'United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women', including the recommendations of the 'CEDAW Committee'.

Thus, in this context, one should note that, on 17/07/2018, the Romanian Parliament passed the *Law no. 178/2018* amending the Law no. 202/2002 on equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men, published in the Official Journal no. 627 of 19 July 2018.

The main provisions of this greatly important normative act refer, among others, to the following aspects:

- Explicit regulation and definition of the concept of 'gender violence' (according to art. 3 let. D of the istanbul convention);
- Regulation of the legal requirements of the new occupations of 'equal opportunity expert' and 'equal opportunity technician', specifying the main duties of these new jobs;
- Establishing the right (for now it is only a right, not an obligation) for several categories of employers (for example: public and private legal entities with more than 50 employees, public institutions, central and local government authorities, civil and military institutions etc.) To appoint a person with specific duties in the job description, in charge of the observance of gender equality requirements and with the undifferentiated and non-discriminatory treatment of women and men; depending on their budget, these employers may also hire or collaborate with the categories of experts or technicians mentioned above;
- An important aspect is the fact that the *county committees and the bucharest committee for equal opportunities to women and men* can and even must include in their organization chart representatives of their respective d.g.a.s.p.c., as well as of the county council and the general council of the city of Bucharest, as the case may be.

As the *National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men* correctly states in Appendix no. 1 - National strategy of promotion of equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men and prevention and control of domestic violence between 2018 and 2021. Pillar - Equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men, 'measures to promote equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men and to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination are applied in the public and private sectors, in the field of labor, education, health, culture and information, politics, participation in decision-making, supply and access to goods and services, regarding the establishment, equipping or expansion of a company or the setup or expansion of any other form of independent activity, as well as in other fields regulated by special laws' (ANES, 2018).

Next, without going into too much detail, their contents being similar to that described already, one should also note (precisely to be able to follow the evolution of the laws in this field) the normative acts that regulate more or less, for better or worse, this extremely important matter for a democratic society:

Law no. 210 of 31 December 1999 concerning paternity leave, meant to assure an appropriate legislative framework for the actual involvement of the father in the raising of newborns

Law no. 210 of 31 December 1999 concerning paternity leave, meant to assure an appropriate legislative framework for the actual involvement of the father in the raising of newborns. According to this law, paternity leave is granted in order to assure the actual involvement of the father in the raising of his newborn child, regardless of whether the child is born out of wedlock or is adopted by him. The father is granted an allowance and is entitled to a childcare course. The allowance is be paid from the salary budget of his employer.

Ordinance no. 137 of 31 August 2000 (republished) on the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination

Ordinance no. 137 of 31 August 2000 (republished) *on the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination:* This is an extremely important normative act, as it is virtually one of the first legal regulations in post-December Romania that address discrimination on any criteria, including gender criteria. It was actually the legal regulation that created the premises and the favorable context for the passing of the Law no. 202 of 2002 (with subsequent amendments and additions),

which has contributed explicitly to the construction of an institutional framework, and which aims at the principle of equality between men and women and states it as a fundamental value for the existence and evolution of the human personality, protecting and guaranteeing it as such. This normative act for the first time explicitly defines the principle of gender equality and that of 'the exclusion of privileges and discrimination', especially 'in terms of rights', among which we list those that we consider a priority: 'the right to equal treatment before the courts and any other jurisdictional body; the right to personal safety and state protection against violence or ill-treatment by any individual, group or institution; political (...), civil rights (to free movement, to choose residence, to leave and return to the country, to obtain and renounce Romanian citizenship, to marry and choose a partner, to property, to inheritance, to freedom of thought, to conscience and religion, to freedom of opinion, to expression, to work, to free choice of occupation, to fair and satisfactory working conditions, to protection against unemployment, to equal pay for equal work, to fair and satisfactory remuneration, to health, to medical care, to social security and social services, to education, to professional training' etc. (GO no. 137/2000 art. 1 para. 2).

Emergency ordinance no. 67 of 27 June 2007 on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women within professional social security schemes

Emergency ordinance no. 67 of 27 June 2007 on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women within professional social security schemes: Considering Romania's new status as a member state of the European Union (which it joined on 1 January 2007), it had, according to the rules of the European Union, the duty to align with them, in all aspects, right from the start of its accession. The fully justified requirements of all EU institutions also regard its alignment with its standards in the matter of 'equal opportunities' and 'undifferentiated and non-discriminatory treatment of women and men', excluding any form of procrastination in the speedy implementation of solutions intended to unequivocally and irreversibly regulate all aspects of public life, including the 'schemes designed to provide employees or self-employed individuals in any business field, professional sector or group of sectors benefits intended to supplement or replace the benefits provided by the general public social security system, regardless of whether membership of these schemes is mandatory or optional' (art. 2 let. a of GEO no. 67/2007), these being nothing else but the *'professional social security schemes'* regulated by this normative act. This normative act was only the first chapter of a complex legislative package aimed at creating advantages for all spheres of public life and constituted exceptional situations which needed to be regulated without the slightest delay, in order to immediately align and harmonize the national legislation with the European one, which the whole Romanian society dreamed of.

Emergency ordinance no. 61 of 14 May 2008 (updated) on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment between women and men in terms of access to goods and services and the provision of goods and services (updated, 2013)

Emergency ordinance no. 61 of 14 May 2008 (updated) on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment between women and men in terms of access to goods and services and the provision of goods and services (updated, 2013): In the same spirit and under the same urgent conditions as in the case of the aforementioned Ordinance (GEO no. 67/2007), considering the times and all the elements that justified the speedy decision to pass a normative act that would (also) regulate this aspect, namely 'access to' and 'supply of' goods and services in a totally undifferentiated manner (on the basis of gender, mainly). Once again, we feel we need to draw the reader's attention to the moment when this ordinance was passed, i.e., 14 May 2008, a little more than a year after Romania had become a full-right EU member state. These rights, however, were also accompanied by obligations, as our country had joined, as shown in the preamble of this

normative act (where the reason for its passing is also mentioned), 'a union of European states sharing the same values, the main ones of which are respect for human dignity, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, that Romania's main objective at this moment is to strengthen the progress and reforms made for its full integration into the community structures, as well as the fact that, as a member state of the European Union, it has, according to community law, the obligation to fully transpose the acquis communautaire starting from 1 January 2007, taking into account the requirements of the European Union concerning the need to implement the principle of equal opportunities to women and men in order to achieve the development of a democratic society, it is necessary to take immediate action to implement the principle of equal treatment of women and men in terms of access to goods and services and of provision of goods and services' (GEO no. 61/2008, preamble and statement of reasons).

Another imperative reason for the urgent passing of this normative act involved the deadlines by which Romania had undertaken to implement European law, including in this matter.

There is an imminent danger (a danger that, although latent, still exists, in case of non-compliance with the obligations undertaken by a member state in any public aspect) that, in case of non-compliance with these deadlines (as well as with any other obligations), one of the most important institutions of the Union, the *European Commission*, should order the totally unwanted initiation of the so-called *'infringement procedure'*; also an individual who considers him/herself discriminated or whose rights were violated in anyway may take the state to court and the proceedings may finally reach, depending of cases and procedures, either the European Court of Human Rights - ECHR (located in Strasbourg, France), or the Court of Justice of the European Union - CJEU (from Luxembourg), which may force the member state (Romania, in our case) to implement and enforce, even retroactively (n.b.!), the 'principle of equal treatment' (GO no. 61/2008, preamble and statement of reasons) or otherwise suffer severe sanctions.

In fact, the European Commission actually sent, before the passing of GEO no. 61/2008, the so-called 'Letter of formal notice no. C (2008)382 of 28 January 2008, by Infogram no. 934 of 30 January 2008 of the Romanian Permanent Representation to the European Union'.

This was a true 'yellow card', a harsh warning to the authorities in Bucharest who had to understand that the rules of the game needed to be observed and that the accession was not only a source of benefits, but an extensive and complex process, which was also intended to 'discipline' decision-makers, and 'meeting deadlines' was just one of the many obligations that accompanied the rights and privileges stemming from the acquisition of full community membership.

In the above-mentioned letter (a true formal notification of default of the 'obligation debtor', a legal institution known in our law), the Commission requested the Romanian authorities to provide answers and solid arguments to the notices regarding the alleged violation within 2 months.

The legal grounds of this very important procedure for the institutions of the European Union, as it is one of defense of the values promoted within it and, as a matter of fact, by all humanity, are comprised in the first two most important documents of the Union, namely:

− *The Treaty on the European Union – TEU (consolidated version)*, (re)published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 26/10/2012, under no. 2012/C 326/01, art. 3. para. 3 second sentence of which unambiguously states that: '[the Union] shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child'.
− *The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union - TFEU* (consolidated version), also (re)published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 26/10/2012, under no. 2012/C 326/01, devotes its entire *5th Section (art. 251 - 281)*, to the COURT OF JUSTICE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, which has concrete, precise and unequivocal duties including in the resolution of the rules and deadlines imposed by community rules.

In order to have a representation of the importance that the E.U. grants justice, one must note that about 10% of the basic Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union is devoted to this section, which is also the case with one of the annexed protocols, namely Protocol no. 3, which includes four titles and has in turn an Annex, which, coincidentally or not, contains over 80 articles, having the richest content in the entire TFEU (in total, over 110 articles on justice, of the approximately 500 articles of the TFEU and its annexes!).

Therefore, the passing of this ordinance was also required to demonstrate, in an honest and transparent manner, that the deadlines and implementation of the European law, to which Romania has committed, would be observed.

Law no. 62 of 1 April 2009 for the approval of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 61/2008 on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment between women and men in terms of access to goods and services and of provision of goods and services

After the period of legislative effervescence (which was a natural phenomenon) generated by Romania's accession on 1 January 2007, when it became full member of the EU (which has also entailed obligations in addition to its rights), an abundant legislative period followed, with a high number of temporary and/or provisional requirements, which had to be developed/passed urgently. Then, things cooled down, and the legislative power, represented in Romania by a bicameral Parliament (the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, with an alternative role as a decision-making body), resumed its main role, that of legislator, and, by the laws it passed (which were significantly more powerful and with significantly better validity than GEOs, for example), it approved and validated the normative acts of the Government of Romania (Executive Power), which, for the sake of efficiency, temporarily and legally subrogated itself, in cases that required maximum urgency (stemming from the new deadlines imposed by the recent accession to the structures of the European Union).

This is also the case of this law that we are commenting on here, which approved the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 61/2008 on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment of women and men in terms of access to goods and services and of provision of goods and services. These laws not only approved the above-mentioned GEOs, but also improved and adapted them to the needs and specificity of Romanian society.

Government Decision no. 933/2013 for the approval of the Organization and Operation Regulation of the National Committee for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (CONES) and DECISION no. 1,054 of 8 September 2005 for the approval of the Organization and Operation Regulation of County Committees and the Bucharest Committee for Equal Opportunities to Women and Men (COJES)

The National Committee for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, or *CONES* in short, was created and operates in accordance with the provisions of art. 24 of Law no. 202/2002 (the framework law, as it was called) *on equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men*, republished.

The most important part of the GD no. 933/2013 is its Annex relating to the way of establishment, operation, duties, purpose, composition etc., all together forming what is normally called 'REGULATION on the organization and operation of the National Committee for equal opportunities for women and men'.

The activity of CONES is coordinated by the Ministry of Labor (by an authorized person, i.e., secretary of state in this ministry), the 'County Committees and the Bucharest Committee for Equal Opportunities to Women and Men' (COJES) being subordinated to it.

At first glance, CONES has an extremely diverse composition, which includes, first of all, the Secretary of State coordinating the activity in the field of equal opportunities between women and men, who also holds the position of chairman of CONES; the organizational chart also includes representatives of the line ministries (with duties in this field as well), as well as of other specialized bodies within the central public administration institutions, which are directly subordinated to the Government of Romania; then, representatives of the autonomous public services, of the national unions, of the employers' associations represented nationally, as well as, last but not least, representatives of the NGOs, which carry out recognized activities and projects (please note that these latter representatives must be elected, voted or appointed by these NGOs).

One should also note that the prerogatives of CONES are also found in its own internal rules regarding its organizational chart and operation requirements, developed by the Directorate for equal opportunities for women and men within the Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Security, and the Elderly, endorsed by CONES members and approved by decision of the Romanian Government.

Mainly, according to *art. 3 para. (1) from the Annex to the GD 933/2013*, CONES fulfills the following prerogatives, among which we list the ones with the greatest impact on the subject matter debated in this paper: '(...) the inclusion of the principle of equal opportunities for women and men in the development and implementation of sectoral policies ; the assessment of the state of application and compliance with the law in the field by central government authorities and development of recommendations for the central government authorities for the implementation of specific policies and programs to promote the principle of equal opportunities for women and men; assessment of the process of harmonization of the national legislation with the European Union regulations in the field of equal opportunities for women and men; and, very importantly, the granting of the advisory opinion on the National Strategy in the field of equal opportunities for women and men and the general action plan for the implementation of the Strategy and participation in its implementation'.

According to the provisions contained in the Regulation of 8 September 2005, 'the County Committees and the Bucharest Committee for Equal Opportunities to Women and Men, hereinafter referred to as COJES, are established within the county departments of labor, social solidarity and family and of Bucharest, respectively' and act under the coordination of CONES, being virtually its local correspondent, as they abide by its rules and have the same duties, operating in the same manner.

Law no. 23 of 9 March 2015 declaring May 8 the 'Day of Equal Opportunities for Women and Men'

With the passing of this normative act, Romania also signed its alignment with the 'HeForShe' Campaign, initiated by the entity under the auspices of the UN, directly responsible for issues related to gender equality and the emancipation of women, an entity much better known under the acronym 'UN Women'.

Another objective of the 'HeForShe' campaign, which is fortunately easier to achieve, is the attraction of young people from all education cycles, as well as teachers, as activists and promoters.

The purpose of this campaign is to raise public awareness in general, and especially male awareness, about these real problems of life and contemporary realities in terms of 'gender equality', since the expected goals may be achieved only through effective, proactive, and undisguised involvement. Thus, men should have a strongly committed role in eradicating differential and discriminatory treatment of women and men, which would certainly lead to the

development of society as a whole and would provide a climate conducive to this development. Another objective of the `HeForShe` campaign, which, fortunately, is an easier one to achieve, is the attraction of young people from all education cycles, as well as teachers, as activists and promoters.

The campaign also includes a pilot project, entitled 'IMPACT 10x10x10 for Women's Empowerment', which is being carried out in ten countries (including Romania, along with Finland, Indonesia, Iceland, Malawi, Japan, Rwanda, Sweden, the Philippines, and Uruguay) and mainly involves their presidents or prime ministers and also the representatives of 10 companies and 10 universities (all men, without exception). All these leaders must become models of best practices of change.

Law no. 22 of 4 March 2016 for declaring March 8 - Women's Day and November 19 - Men's Day

According to this normative act, 'public local government authorities may organize demonstrations and public events to celebrate these days. Also, 'the Romanian Television Society and the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Society may broadcast shows created to promote women's rights or, as the case may be, men's rights' (Art. 1-4 of the Law no. 22/2016).

Emergency ordinance no. 111 of 8 December 2010 on parental leave and monthly allowance for raising children and Law no. 66 of 19 April 2016 (updated) amending and complementing the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 111/2010 on parental leave and monthly allowance for raising children

In the preamble of the GEO no. 111/2010, the issuing body of this normative act (Government of Romania) presents the reasons behind the act. It states that, due to the 'difficulties of paying social security benefits from the public budget, in 2010 (author's note: that is, in the period following the peak of the world crisis that began in 2008), the Law no. 118/2010 on some necessary measures needed to restore the budget balance, with later amendments and additions, the allowance for raising children was decreased by 15%'.

According to the same document, 'despite slight improvements in the economic situation, financial conditions remain difficult, the economic activity in Romania in recent months is still marked by recession' (GEO no. 111/2010, preamble, 1).

Thus, for greater efficiency of the 'child raising allowance program or, as the case may be, of the monthly insertion incentive program, it was reanalyzed taking into account its duration and funding in other European Union member states that grant similar allowances' (GEO no. 111/2010, preamble, 2).

'The economic situation required the efficient use of the public budget resources, including of the funds used to pay child raising allowances or, as the case may be, monthly insertion incentives, resulting in the need to rethink this program in terms of duration, conditions of eligibility and amounts granted' (GEO no. 111/2010, preamble, 4).

In conclusion, according to the anti-crisis plan, recommended and supported by the EU, the IMF and the World Bank, the solutions chosen by Romania 'had to lead to the normalization of financial conditions and to the preparation of economic recovery, and the actions taken were to be implemented as of January 2011' (GEO no. 111/2010, preamble, 4).

Romanian Constitution

Last but not least, it is very important that we clarify one last aspect. In its art. 16, the *Romanian Constitution* itself dwells on equality of rights, stating and supporting the principle of gender equality and non-discrimination. Since it is the fundamental law of any State governed by the rule of law, we will quote the entire text, so that it can be used as a source:

'1. Citizens are equal before the law and public authorities, without privileges and without discrimination.

2. No one is above the law.

3. Public positions and dignities, civil or military, may be held, under the law, by persons who are Romanian nationals and reside in the country. The Romanian state guarantees equal opportunities to women and men for the occupation of these positions and dignities.

4. Given Romania's accession to the European Union, citizens of the Union who meet the requirements of the organic law have the right to elect and be elected in local public administration authorities' (Romanian Constitution, art. 16).

Concretely, ANES, which is the main institution of the central public administration authorities that manages and coordinates at the national level this sensitive and unfortunately vulnerable field, which is still present among the daily realities of contemporary Romanian society, has also established a toll-free 24h/24 number (0800-500-333) to support any (potential) victim of gender discrimination, domestic violence etc.

We have also provided this information in this material, which is apparently unrelated to the legal issues regulating gender equality, domestic violence etc., for the simple reason that, in a society going on the path to digitization at an unimaginable speed, the existence of a toll-free number is the most accessible means and the easiest way to 'report' such problems to the public bodies concretely and immediately involved in protecting, supporting or accurately guiding any person in difficulty.

Desiderata and Conclusions of the National Strategy on the Promotion of Equal Opportunities and Undifferentiated and Non-discriminatory Treatment of Women and Men

As provided, unequivocally, in the 'National Strategy on the Promotion of Equal Opportunities and Equal Treatment between Women and Men and on the Prevention and Control of Domestic Violence for the Period 2018-2021', strategy developed by the main institution in Romania with duties in this field , the National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 'the balanced representation of women and men in the decision-making process is a must in a truly participatory democracy, but also a prerequisite for a society devoid of any form of gender-based discrimination' (National Strategy, 2018, 1).

The strategy further highlights the decisive role of the concerted intensification of efforts aimed at preserving and developing the benefits gained from empowering women in all areas of public life (political-social, economic etc.)

Thus, the 2018-2021 national strategy revealed the obvious fact, based on thorough research, that, 'during the economic (and global financial crisis of 2008-2010, author's note) crisis, the companies and organizations that had more women in their decision-making boards managed to identify more easily the necessary actions to overcome the inherent obstacles of the crisis' (National Strategy, 2018, 2).

Moreover, Mauro Guillén, a brilliant American sociologist with Spanish origins, claimed in his well-known book entitled '2030: How Today's Biggest Trends Will Collide and Reshape the Future of

Everything' that, 'if Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters, the global financial crisis would have been avoided'.

The active integration of gender matters into national policies is undoubtedly a great plus for a democratic and unbiased society.

Thus, public policies (including gender equality policies) have already been worldwide and in Romania for the next decade, which provide for effective solutions aimed at transforming society into an inclusive one in terms of balanced representation of women and men, who will participate equally in the various fields of public life, in both execution and decision-making sectors. Let us mention here the main strategies, structured around the specificity of their intervention area: 'National strategy for sustainable development of Romania horizons 2013 - 2020 – 2030', 'National strategy for employment 2020 – 2025' etc.

In conclusion, according to the ANES Strategy, 'the approach to the issue of equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men and to the actions necessary to achieve and consolidate gender equality includes both an integrated and a sectoral perspective meant to express the multidimensional nature of the intervention area' (National Strategy, 2018, 3).

EUROPEAN UNION LAW AND STRATEGIES IN THE FIELD OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Achievements of the European Commission in the Field; Areas for Priority Action

Gender Equality - a Desideratum of the European Union

Although there are still many gaps in the field of gender equality (as well as an uneven yet natural development), notable progress has been made in the EU in terms of protecting and guaranteeing the 'gender perspective' in the last twenty-thirty years.

However, these notable results were reached neither by chance nor chaotically, but, on the contrary, by a concrete plan, a set of measures stemming from observations and thorough research, over a considerable period of time. Among these measures, we believe that we should mention the following, as they guarantee success and are examples of good practices in any form of democratic state or union organization:

– first, it is about legislating the field, creating clear and concise rules of law with uniform and immediate community applicability;
– second, all community public policies should include specific legislation or at least the evocation (at the level of each community activity sector) of the principles of 'equal opportunities' and 'undifferentiated and non-discriminatory treatment of women and men', of equality between women and men;
– last but not least, we should mention policies aimed at the emancipation of women and at increasing their participation in all areas of community life;
– these measures should rely, without exception, on a solid education from the earliest possible age, education that begins in the family and continues at school. 'To this end, boys and girls must be educated from an early age about gender equality and the development of non-violent relationships must be supported' (Gender equality strategy, 2020, 1).

Despite some failings (like, for example: lower payment for the same work, little participation in the decision-making process or jobs in areas that are a priori less well paid etc.), there are however many positive signals – the number of women in the workforce is constantly increasing, and an ever-greater number of women score very high in assessments.

Elements of European Strategy 2020- 2025

The strategy of the European Union regarding the elimination of gender stereotypes is related to the desideratum of the European Commission (hereunder the Commission), publicly stated through the voice of its president, Mrs. Ursula von der Leyen, namely that of building 'a Union of equality'.

The objectives of the Strategy are based on community public policies and concrete activities, aimed at reaching notable performance, so that Europe is ever closer to one of its main goals, namely that of becoming a ***'continent where women are equal to men'***, so that all its inhabitants (regardless of gender) benefit from the freedom to choose their own path, enjoy equal opportunities of personal and career development, true to their ideas and beliefs, and also have the chance, under

real conditions of meritocracy, to occupy leadership positions according to the skills they have educated, cultivated and developed.

Here are some of the main desiderata of the European Strategy in terms of 'gender equality':

− Ending all forms of violence (including 'work violence and harassment') against women;
− Eradicating all gender stereotypes;
− Combating all gender-based inequalities in employment (working conditions, types of work etc.), discrepancies in wages, social security, including pensions;
− Exclusion of all ancestral gender stereotypes, still deeply rooted in collective mentalities, stereotypes regarding the distribution of specific chores in households and in the family in general.
− Reaching gender equity in terms of non-discriminatory and undifferentiated participation in decision-making in general, including in politics.

This strategy generally focuses on specific programs and activities carried out within the community, but with consequences (reflected by the foreign politics actions of the European Union) outside the EU as well, where campaigns are also carried out for the elimination of gender stereotypes and for the promotion of women, following the examples of good practices within the Union.

After only one year of applying the rules of the European Strategy in the matter, on March 4, 2021, the Commission proposed mandatory measures to ensure salary transparency, this being one of the first results of the strategy. After only one year of applying the rules of the European Strategy in the field, on 4 March 2021, the Commission suggested mandatory actions meant to assure salary transparency, this being one of the first results of the strategy.

On 8 March 2022, the European Commission proposed a new directive on intensifying stances against any act of violence (seen in all aspects and in all environments) against women, including domestic violence, thus seeking to enforce specific minimum rules concerning the rights of this category of victims and to criminalize forms of violence against women, as well as cyber violence.

Objectives of the Commission's Commitments to the Principle of Gender Equality

The efforts made by the European Commission in the field of gender equality to achieve the objectives in the period 2016-2019 were also found in the five-year plan proposed for the reference period (2020-2025) in the direction of ensuring gender equality.

This commitment focused on five major priority pillars, which we will briefly list below:

− Creating all the premises, so that women can access the offers on the employment market as easily as possible, assuring the economic-financial independence of both women and men;
− Reducing and even eliminating any imbalance in terms of wages, pensions, income, in general, between men and women to eradicate women's poverty and financial dependence;
− Encouraging gender equality in leadership;
− Constant fight against any act of violence against women, but also the protection, support or correct guidance of individuals in difficulty;
− Campaigning to eradicate gender stereotypes and promote women's rights worldwide.

Legal Rules Regulating 'Gender Equality' in the European Union

Here is a review of the main legislation issued by the institutions of the European Union (namely, the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Commission, the Court of Justice of the European Union, the European Central Bank and the Court of Auditors) in this field:

– Treaty on the European Union and Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (both in consolidated version), (re)published in the Official Journal of the European Union of 26/10/2012, under no. 2012/C 326/01;
– Council Directive 79/7/EEC of 19 December 1978 on the progressive implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women in matters of social security;
– Council Directive 92/85/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding (tenth individual Directive within the meaning of Article 16 (1) of Directive 89/391/EEC);
– Council Directive 2004/113/EC of 13 December 2004 implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services
– Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast);
– Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010 implementing the revised Framework Agreement on parental leave concluded by BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC and repealing Directive 96/34/EC;
– Directive 2010/41/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 July 2010 on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity and repealing Council Directive 86/613/EEC;
– Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (re)published in the Official Journal of the European Union C 326/391 of 26/10/2012;
– Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025.

Finally, as a conclusion to the chapter on the European strategy of gender equality, we will partly quote article 21 paragraph (1) of the CHARTER OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, which expressly refers to non-discrimination in general, with reference also to gender-related discrimination, which, coincidentally or not, is listed first. Thus, according to the Charter, '[a]ny discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion, or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited' (Charter, 2012, 1).

GENDER EQUALITY FROM THE STANDPOINT OF THE UN CONVENTION ON THE MATTER (CEDAW)

In accordance with the UN *'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women – CEDAW'*, Romania has been committed, although only formally at first, for over 40 years (it was in 1981 that the then president of Romania signed the Decree of our country's accession to this Convention) to eliminating discrimination against women and adopting legislative and other measures aimed at assuring the elimination of all its forms and manifestations.

On 6 September 2000, Romania also signed the *Optional Protocol to CEDAW*, which it ratified in January 2003.

In 2017, Romania presented the *combined reports 7 and 8 on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women* to the CEDAW Committee. These reports covered the period between 2006 and 2016 and were based on the previous recommendations of the CEDAW Committee, which it had included in its 6th periodic report for 2006, but also on a number of issues and preliminary questions addressed to Romania by the Secretary General of the UN, in the preliminary stage of the 67th session of the Committee.

Thus, the Government of Romania has expressed its commitment to comply with the provisions of the Convention within its governance programs between 2017 and 2020, a commitment reaffirmed for the period 2021-2025. Thus, 'gender equality' is a priority for the Romanian Government, as proven by a special section devoted to this field within the social model developed by them. That section is entitled 'Public Policies in the Field of Employment and Social Justice - item 8 - Respect and dignity for women'.

Constitutional provisions are fundamental in the process of creating a society that offers the same 'opportunities, rights and obligations' to both women and men, a society in which a real and permanent balance is achieved by blurring the differences between women and men.

Significant progress has been made in Romania in all these respects, but some of these aspects still have a certain degree of fragility, as also pointed out by the *CEDAW Committee in its recommendations and final conclusions*.

The re-establishment of the National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men - ANES - was praised by the CEDAW Committee, which also welcomed the efforts to create, *together with civil society and other relevant institutions*, the new National Strategy on equal opportunities for women and men and on prevention and control of domestic violence. In this regard, the Committee made a series of recommendations related to the measures and actions in the operational plan of actions necessary for the implementation of the strategy, as follows:

− Improving the human and financial resources of ANES necessary for the implementation of the provisions of CEDAW, the development, at both central and local level, of secure mechanisms to follow the application of Law no. 202/2002, a more solid and better cooperation with civil society and, last but not least, penalties for non-compliance with legal provisions;
− Incorporating the recommendations made in the new National Strategy on equal opportunities for women and men and on the prevention and control of domestic violence and tracking the effectiveness of the implementation of both the aforementioned strategy and Law no. 202/2002, with an appropriate allocation of resources in this regard;
− Defining the implementation measures of the principle of 'transversality' mentioned in Law no. 202/2002 and their inclusion in the strategy, measures to provide for the use of the 'gender dimension' and also 'gender-based budgeting' within all government institutions and strategies, or measuring the impact that 'gender equality' has on existing legislation in order to take corrective actions on legislation and to further define aspects that emphasize the 'gender

dimension'; these actions require efforts from both central authorities, such as ministries, and local authorities;

− Reflecting the issues of *Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace, and security* in an action plan for its implementation, adopted at the national level.

The CEDAW Committee also welcomed the increase in the number of women parliamentarians in the Romanian Parliament and a series of legislative proposals initiated with the aim of including 'gender quotas' in politics. In this respect, it formulated the following recommendations:

− Identifying obstacles to women's involvement in public and political life, establishing strategies to support them in their efforts to overcome them, with special attention paid to women from ethnic minorities;
− Implementation of the provisions of Law no. 202/2002, especially of section 4 thereof, and the more accelerated increase in the number of women holding management positions and being decision-maker within the central and local public administration; these objectives may be achieved through leadership skills training courses organized for the benefit of women, but also through special measures adopted temporarily, in compliance with the provisions of article 4 para. (1) of the Convention.

The CEDAW Committee's recommendations on education include measures to 'combat gender stereotypes among young people' which consist of supporting them to build careers in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), but also in the very fashionable field of information and communication technology (ICT).

The CEDAW Committee has also made a series of recommendations regarding harmonizing professional and family life, as well as eliminating gender stereotypes:

− Creating more career and job opportunities for women, especially those living in rural areas.
− Implementing plans to combat occupational discrimination, pursuing, and obtaining greater participation of women in the economic decision-making process, especially within the management and supervisory structures of private enterprises; an example of a concrete measure in this regard is the imposition of female representation quotas within the boards of directors of the largest companies on the Bucharest Stock Exchange.

In the very important area of healthcare, the CEDAW Committee insists on the overwhelming importance of reproductive health education in order to 'prevent and combat sexual abuse' and to 'observe the rights to sexual and reproductive non-discrimination and identity'. Another critical aspect of reproductive health education is represented by pressing issues such as the 'high prevalence of infant mortality, mother mortality, breast cancer and teenage pregnancy', which are largely due to the lack of sex education classes that should be taught at school, especially to vulnerable groups including Roma women, disabled women, migrants, women diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, elderly women and the homeless.

'TRANSFORMING OUR WORLD: The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' is a program of concerted actions and activities, suggested worldwide in the field of emergence, which supports and promotes the balance between the three pillars of sustainable development: the economic field, the social field, and the environmental issues.

As an absolute first, the actions are addressed to both highly developed and emerging societies.

Thus, *'Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 - Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls'* defines a series of priority strategic axes for all member states, materialized in related objectives, which we will briefly list hereunder instead of a final conclusion.

These principles, structured on the nine axes, may represent at any time attributes and desiderata in terms of 'gender equality' for any state entity, public institution relevant in the matter etc. that want to be considered as democratic, emancipatory, or innovative, and want to be examples of good practices in this extremely sensitive field, a field that adds value to any person or institution that implements it honestly and sustainably.

We list them here, in a form as close as possible to that expressed by the CEDAW Committee:

— Eliminating discrimination against women and girls in all its forms;
— Preventing violence against women and girls, in all its forms, in both public or private environments, with explicit reference to human trafficking, exploitation and/or sexual harassment or other forms of exploitation;
— Total exclusion of all harmful practices such as: early marriage of children (the un proposes to all member states that the idea of childhood and minority should extend, without exception, at least to the age of 18, an age that may be increased punctually, depending on the physical, physiological, mental and psycho-emotional development of each individual child), forced marriage and/or female genital mutilation;
— Fair remuneration for work as carer and for household work, by providing them with public services, by legislative efforts in this sense and by granting them social security, but also by national support to the division of household and/or family chores;
— Granting women full and real access, under conditions of equal opportunities, to actions, activities and leadership positions, at all decision-making levels in public life with its various fields - political, economic, mass media, social etc.;
— Assuring the access of every girl or woman to education about and access to public sexual and reproductive health services and guaranteeing reproductive rights as listed and defined in the international conference on population and development program of action and the beijing declaration and platform for action and in the documents and official acts arising from debates held on the occasion of subsequent review conferences;
— Implementing reforms whereby women have equal rights with men regarding access to economic resources, ownership and control of land, but also on other forms and means of private property right, financial services, successions and natural resources, according to legislation in their countries;
— Improving skills and competences in the use of technology, especially information and communication technology, in order to support the real and practical recognition of women's qualities and skills;
— Developing and implementing clear and sustainable public policies, and also adapting and updating existing legislation that regulates equal opportunities and real inclusion at all societal levels of all girls and women.

STRUCTURAL CAUSES OF INEQUALITIES AND DISCRIMINATION

As important as education is, and it is very important, in reducing some inequalities, including through the mediation of parity indicators, it is obvious that their origin matters and not all solutions are found only in school but also in social, cultural, political and economic factors, where solutions to reduce them must also be sought (Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015).

Discrimination against women derives from gendered power relations, being supported by gender stereotypes that express behavioral social expectations considered 'appropriate for women, the violation of which is penalized' (Kaltenborn *et al.*, 2020: 79), gender being considered a social construct that prescribes appropriate behaviors for women or for men.

Social Construction of Gender

One root cause of gender inequalities that is both deep and serious in that it is embedded in what is considered 'normality' is the social construction of gender. Gender is defined as a set of socially constructed expectations about the roles and behaviors that are considered 'appropriate' and 'expected' from girls and boys (Smiler, 2009). Society, by its definitions, generates, allows, maintains, and justifies inequalities, which are thus reproduced and perpetuated.

One cannot discuss the social construction of gender without briefly reviewing some notions about social constructionist theories. As part of postmodernism, social constructionism is a context that made it possible to understand the world from a more flexible perspective and brought about a series of social changes (Burr, 1998). Starting from the idea that social constructionism is difficult to capture in a unitary definition, one of the main ideas that it promotes is the one aimed at the construction of multiple realities in the interactions between people (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011), being oriented towards 'communication and relationships between people and towards the process of constructing meaning in social interactions' (Cojocaru *et al.*, 2012: 32).

The main contribution of social constructionist theories to understanding humans made it possible to approach personality as a social construct, leaving aside modernist conceptions in which personality is explained by trait theories as a stable structure, which offers the possibility of acquiring identity alternatives influenced by the meaning given to certain events or situations (Burr, 1998), depending on the spatial or temporal context in which they occur. Overcoming modernist concepts that promote knowledge as a self-existent reality with generally valid truth value allows the recognition of the relativity of meaning in various cultural spaces, which legitimizes as an object of sociological knowledge 'the analysis of the social construction of reality' (Berger & Luckmann, 1984: 15), personality itself, with its attributes, being considered a social construct. In this context, identity becomes flexible, being considered to be the result of 'the confluence of chosen or prescribed commitments, personal characteristics and beliefs about oneself, from a relational point of view, as a result of roles and positions in relation to significant others, from a collective perspective, resulting from the membership of some groups and social categories' (Vignoles *et al.*, 2011: 4), a continuously developing process, which involves individual transformations, but also recognizes social influences, which are more or less conscious. Gender identity, detached from biological sex identity, thus becomes a socially constructed concept, being the result of attitudinal, behavioral, and relational prescriptions that are both the result and the process of constituting social discourses. From this point of view, socially constructed gender creates characteristics able to identifiably describe men and women as different, being normalized, for example, male violence identified with masculinity (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). The fact that identity has no meaning in itself is emphasized by Hogg *et al.* (1995) who believe that the meaning of identity is acquired by relating to others in social interactions (Burke & Reitzes, 1981), self-understanding and self-definition being based on others' responses to role identities. Therefore, if we approach gender identity from this perspective, being male or female can be socially validated by observing behavioral prescriptions and socially accepted

gender traits as appropriate. According to rhetorical-responsive social constructionism (Shotter, 1997), people are in a process of permanent construction and reconstruction, through interrelationships with others, reality being constructed according to circumstances, and the meanings of words come from the linguistic negotiations that take place during everyday dialogues between people, and people give meaning to their own experiences through constant negotiations with the environment (Cojocaru et al., 2012; Van der Haar, 2002). Social constructionism therefore offers a more flexible framework of interpretation of the notion of gender, which, no longer considered a reality in itself, opens up the possibility of alternative realities; seeing gender as 'socially, culturally and historically' constructed allows the possibility of re-construction 'in an alternative, more liberating and egalitarian form' (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015: 401).

Contribution of Individual Gender Stories to Community Stories

The narrative, which Gergen (2005) tackles from the standpoint of social discourse, is invested as a form of construction and constitution of community and individual identity realities, being influenced by traditions, stories circulated in the community etc. Social constructionism was the context in which the narrative approach was developed, which focused on the way in which stories are constituted in a community, the narrative being considered 'a spoken or written linguistic phenomenon' (Gergen, 2005, p. 100), in which the core element is the intelligibility of the narrative. A well-constructed story includes several criteria, among which, along with the need to create meaning, through a certain ordering of the story, Gergen (2005) also lists the tendency to assure, through the story, the preservation of the identity aspects mentioned in the story or the need to communicate the change that could motivate the story itself. The importance of the story is given by the contribution to the construction of the meaning of an individual's life, according to the criteria mentioned by Gergen (2005), which are described as conventions able to convey coherence and direction to life events, thus playing a central role in the construction of individual and community reality. Moreover, emphasis is placed on the fact that the manner in which an individual constructs their narrative is as a result of choosing from the multiple forms of construction to which the individual has cultural access. The individual thus contributes, through their construction, to the 'cultural background of the community', the narrative being invested with the role of 'reflecting and creating cultural values' (Gergen, 2005: 110). Therefore, the narrative contributes to the generation and support of the value system, which involves the individual in actions of a political and moral nature, contributing to the creation of 'institutional patterns of social guidance' (Gergen, 2005: 110), through which traditions are created and supported or challenged (Gergen, 2005). This reciprocal individual-social construction is also described by Berger and Luckman (1966) as the basis for the constitution of the social context in which primary socialization takes place, when the mother is associated by the child with care (Sandu, 2016). Secondary socialization, which takes place within the institutionalized learning process, is based on the values and knowledge acquired in the primary socialization stage, where self-identity is dependent on what significant others have offered as identification (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Knowledge derived from primary socialization contributes to and is the result of the process of institutionalization in the primary group, which is the family. Habits create patterns, models in both individual and social actions, narrowing the possibilities of action, the use of models assuring more efficiency in decision-making, simply by using previous experiences, validated over time. When certain actions, jointly constructed by members of a social group, are shared by all members of the group and are equally available to all, and contribute to determining the appropriate actions of individuals, 'institutionalization', which refers to 'taking for granted' certain actions and interactions, makes it possible for the group to function more easily. In other words, through repeated practice, certain behaviors come to be considered normal, from 'we do it like that again' to a form of expression that already reflects a pattern of action, 'this is how things are done' (Berger & Luckmann, 1996). The child, who is born in an already constituted social framework, is transmitted a socially constituted world that becomes objective and is taken for granted, the very process of socialization of the child validating the objectivity of the

world that was transmitted to them by their parents. Therefore, manners of interaction will be transmitted to the child. Gender is a social construction both as an idea in the sense that it is a result of the action of historical forces and events, but also as an object ('object' being everything that is not an idea) because the classification by genders (and thus their identification) is at the intersection of a complex network of institutions and practices (Haslanger, 2017). From this perspective, the definition of gender comes from the past and from outside the individual who is contained in frameworks over which they have no influence. Gender is not a given (which may be linked to biological characteristics) but a construct the content of which depends, at least partially, on the roles that an individual in a certain context has to fulfill. As a result, 'the specifics of what it means to be a woman (or a man) will differ by race, ethnicity, class etc.' (Haslanger, 2017). The way in which the individual comes to define themselves through the influence of external definitions also appears in the model of the self as a network developed by Wallace (2019) whereby identity is in the middle of a network of (social) definitions/roles that the individual fulfills, gender being one of the most important. Likewise, shifting focus from the individual, we may consider that not only identity, the self, is influenced by external definitions but also gender itself which is, in turn, at the core of a network.

The construction of gender is not independent of power, but a consequence of its exercise and a means of its perpetuation. According to Stromquist (2013), gender is 'a system of oppression both tangible and subtle that, built upon the social construction of femininity and masculinity, enables institutional practices and individual beliefs in ways that give the asymmetrical distribution of freedom and power a "natural" and indisputable reality.'

Gender expectations refer, on the one hand, to the roles considered appropriate for women or men in a given context and which determine access to certain opportunities. For girls in America these expectations are about being pretty, nurturing, focused on others, on how they look, acting with a passive or reactive approach to dating and sexuality, and eventually becoming the primary caregivers in their families. By contrast, boys are expected to be independent, unemotional, to show stamina and power, to take an active role in dating and sex, and to become the main income providers (breadwinners) in their families. The result of these paired expectations is that members of the population are encouraged to focus only on certain gender-appropriate aspects of their personality and interests, and to abandon others as 'inappropriate'. (Smiler, 2009: 358) Apart from the content of roles, the social construction of gender also prescribes the social and economic use of the result of work. The sources of constraints arising from the social construction of gender are numerous and operate on several levels (Subrahmanian, 2005):

− Accepted standards about what girls and boys are supposed to do and how activities and roles are seen determine the opportunities each has access to;
− Women may be prevented from accessing certain opportunities by the current activities that they must do (maternity, child care, household work);
− Even when the above obstacles are overcome, within the opportunity accessed (for example, schooling), girls and women must face a gender inequality 'often institutionalized in the standards, processes and structures of interventions and institutions'. For example, in the case of education, even when girls enroll in school in large numbers, if a curriculum or discriminatory attitudes of teachers are maintained within this institution, inequalities will persist;
− The derogatory evaluation of women transmitted by social norms may end up being internalized, generating a sense of distrust and doubt in their own abilities and, in terms of action, to their self-exclusion from accessing existing opportunities.

Example of Different Results in Mathematics

The way in which the social construction of gender influences their development is noticeable in female students' attitudes towards mathematics and even towards specializations related to

science and exact sciences. Educators, perhaps often unaware of internalized gender stereotypes in school, guide girls and boys differently according to social expectations, for example guiding girls to literature classes and boys to mathematics and science classes (Smiler, 2009). This is not a theoretical scenario, as it has been confirmed. Over time, since the 80s, more research has shown that girls have lower grades than boys in mathematics (Baker & Perkins Jones, 2005). The beginning was made by two researchers – Camellia Benbow and Julian Stanley (Benbow & Stanley, 1980) (Benbow & Stanley, 1983) – who showed, in several papers, that, in secondary education, boys had the highest grades in this subject. The authors of these papers themselves accounted for the differences by reference to the innate characteristics of girls and boys, refusing to consider possible social causes. Research that continued in the following years in the United States showed, however, that this difference was steadily decreasing, narrowing year by year, which proves that it was not the result of a biological or other factor. Differences still persist nowadays – it is difficult to predict their dynamics in the absence of standardized tools that are applied over several years – which means that the issue should be further researched by specialists. For instance, in most OECD countries (OECD & PISA, 2015), there are less girls than boys among the highest performing students in mathematics. The exceptions are female students from Macao-China, Singapore and Taipei where there is no gender difference among the top 5% highest performing students. On the other hand, in none of the OECD countries do girls outperform their peers, and the differences are even greater in mathematics when average learning outcomes are considered.

In explaining these differences, which are not always convincing, yet cannot be prevented, specialists agree that they are due to the way in which the family and the school perceive opportunities for girls to attend other schools and ultimately to get a job. Whereas this projection is unfavorable in terms of the chances of pursuing careers related in one way or another to mathematics (science, engineering, computer science etc.), girls are discouraged from focusing on mathematics and are guided towards (persuaded to pursue) other fields. Opportunities are closely related to performance: if students (or their parents) perceive future opportunities related to their current performance, they will try to increase their effort to achieve it. The school and parents are sending the message that their performance is a 'currency' that they can exchange for an advantageous rate in the future. In our case, the more future opportunities are gender-stratified, the more performance itself will be gender-stratified (Baker & Perkins Jones, 2005). At individual level, this projection manifests itself in girls' lack of confidence in their mathematics skills. Across all countries and economies participating in PISA assessments in 2012 (except for children in Albania, Bulgaria, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Montenegro, *Romania*, Serbia, and Turkey) girls reported strong feelings of mathematics anxiety that were associated with a drop in performance of 34 points, the equivalent of one year of study (OECD & PISA, 2015).

These new results confirm that the differences between boys and girls, when they exist in terms of learning outcomes, are not innate, but due to the expectations and opportunities made available socially and according to which students build their future course and present internal balance.

The concept on which gender equality is based, which relies on gender parity without being similar with it, could assure an equitable participation in education of men and women, the measurement of which carries some limits, among which, the understanding that the measurement of access and participation in education are not faithful indicators of the educational process, being rather statistical measures, gender parity being seen as a quantitative indicator, and gender equality as a qualitative indicator (Wilson, 2004). Therefore, the effort to develop gender equality should consider broader aspects, which also involve the inequality of power relations between men and women, even if they were enrolled in school in equal numbers, which makes it necessary to approach relational dimensions of gender inequalities (Subrahmanian, 2005). Moreover, the mere concern for equal access to education has not proved to be enough to assure gender equality between girls and boys, women, and men. School and teachers are considered very important, as

early as primary education, as they contribute to the construction and shaping of the identity and attitude of girls and boys, influenced, in turn, by the socio-cultural contexts, dominated by poverty, bullying or gender-based violence that perpetuates gender inequality (Aragonés-González *et al.*, 2020).

Relly *et al.* (2022) analyzes the influence that expectations about one's own person or the expectations of significant others may have on academic performance, especially during the training period, giving as an example the famous experiment *Pygmalion in the classroom* (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The experiment highlights the effect that the teacher's different attitude towards students could have on boys and girls, linking it to the phenomenon called 'male pride, female humility' (Relly *et al.*, 2022: 1), which refers to the general tendency of men to overestimate their intelligence compared to women (Frunham *et al.*, 2001; Relly *et al.*, 2022), despite the fact that psychological studies show that men and women do not differ in terms of level of intelligence. The motivation for these examples comes from the fact that self-assessment of the level of intelligence is related to academic motivation influencing students' choices, which depend on their confidence in their intellectual abilities (Eccles *et al.*, 1990; Relly *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, parents' perception of their children's talent in mathematics, English and sports is considered to be influenced by the gender stereotypes of parents, who provide children with different games, may encourage them to pursue those areas in which they consider them talented and that the trust transmitted by parents differently, according to gender, contributes to the phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecies.
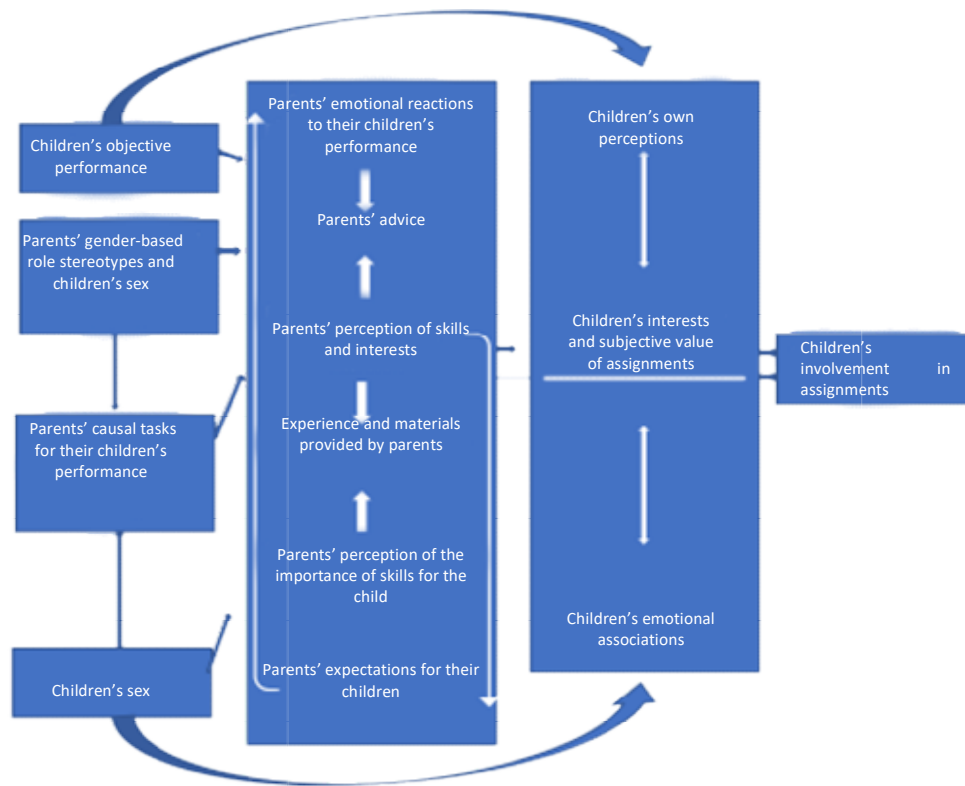

Figure 2. Theoretical model of the effects of self-fulfilling prophecies in the family (*Source:* Ecles *et al.*, 1990)

The authors argue that the importance of these parental influences also influences the differential choice of jobs by women and men. Thus, through the gender-oriented choices that women make, they expose themselves much more to the risks of limited income and poverty (Ecles *et al.*, 1990). The male hubris/female humility (MHFH) effect may be the result of parents' gender-related beliefs and expectations, making them feel 'smart and capable or overwhelmed and incapable of higher intellectual achievement' (Reilly *et al.*, 2022), thereby contributing to the construction and perpetuation of gender stereotypes.

Multiple Forms of Oppression

Another structural cause that prevents the assurance of equity alongside the social construction of gender is the finding that individuals are not victims of a single direction of oppression, but of several directions that act together. In other words, an individual's identity is assured by the contribution of several characteristics and factors that may influence him/her differently, such as geography, skills, ethnicity, language, religion, power relations. According to the theory of intersectionality that starts from this finding, 'people live multiple layered identities derived from social relations, history and the action of power structures. Intersectional analysis reveals multiple identities and thus reveals different types of discrimination and disadvantages that appear as a consequence of combining identities' (McCready, 2009: 333). This is also a result of the fact that identities contribute decisively to the identification of those who are 'marginal' in society (Wallace, 2019: 77)

Understanding identity as a multi-layered reality may account for the inequalities that persist even in conditions of assuring some equalities, such as access to education. If all other prerequisites acted equally on women and men, then access to education would also be an effective measure; nonetheless, if there are other imbalances, they will manifest themselves. According to Baily & Holmarsdottir (2015: 838), women tend to be more vulnerable than men in crisis situations. For example, in the case of economic crises, women are the first victims, they lose their jobs first and in greater numbers; they are doubly discriminated against when they also have disabilities, producing more serious effects that cannot be solved by promoting gender parity alone; in rural areas, women are exposed to much greater risks (lack of jobs, poverty, violence, school dropout etc.). There are vicious circles that occur, persist and grow, and whose main victims are girls and women. For instance, poverty may cause disability (through poor nutrition, lack of access to healthcare and social services), which in turn causes exclusion and lack of access to education, which ultimately accentuates poverty.

Effects of the COVID 19 Pandemic Distributed Differently according to Gender

The COVID 19 pandemic has undermined efforts to achieve gender equality goals, with women being far more affected than men in terms of job losses, as the share of women working in the hospitality industry, in the food industry etc. is higher than that of men (Froehlicher *et al.*, 2021). This additional pressure on girls compared to boys, which shows its effects in crisis situations, was also confirmed by a recent study on the indirect effects that the COVID 19 pandemic had in 193 countries between March 2020 and September 2021 (Flor *et al.*, 2022). According to this research, there were significant differences between women and men in terms of access to health and social and economic impact during the pandemic. The highest increases were recorded in the field of labor and unpaid work. Although the loss of jobs was widespread, it hit women a lot harder than men. Thus, in September 2021, 26% of women and 20.4% of men reported job losses during the pandemic. Job losses were accompanied by lower income levels especially among women in South and Southeast Asia and Oceania. Women were also more affected in terms of housework and caring for other family members, except in North Africa and the Middle East. The largest gender gap was detected in developed countries in caring for others (1/10 ratio between women and men) and housework in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (with a 1/22 ratio between women and

men). Whereas in March 2020 the likelihood of women leaving their job to care for others was 1.8 times higher than that of men, in September 2021 this likelihood increased to 2.4. Finally, women and girls who were in some form of education at that time were 1.21 times more likely than men and boys to drop out of school for reasons other than school closure. The largest gap in this indicator was recorded in Central and Eastern Europe (4.10) and in South Asia (1.48).

These figures demonstrate that in times of crisis women suffer more than men, taking on additional responsibilities that prevent them from exercising their rights even when they exist. For example, their 'job description' prioritizes taking care of others and when the need arises - in case of pandemic, natural disasters or armed conflicts - they, to a much greater extent than men, leave whatever they were doing before - school or gainful employment - to care for those affected.

The deepening of gender inequalities in crisis situations may be accounted for by the beliefs associated with social roles, which prescribe for women traits that identify them with the role of 'household carer' and 'lower social status-roles in society' (Eagly&Wood, 1999 , p. 412), unlike men who are seen as strong and stoic, in line with their image of 'providers outside the home' and with their 'higher status-roles in society' (Fisher & Ryan, 2021, p. 239). Although women are more involved in the workforce, gender expectations still bind women to home chores, and the COVID 19 pandemic has done nothing but highlight the overwork of women as 'caregivers' and at the same time as 'productive people at work' (Fisher & Ryan, 2021, p. 239). Moreover, the idea that gender roles are forward-looking is emphasized, associating behaviors like sensitivity and delicacy with women, who in this context cannot show coldness or stoicism, just as men cannot show anxiety, but rather strength and determination, and the context of the pandemic has done nothing but reaffirm gender differences, emphasizing 'women-specific' anxious and emotional reactions, as opposed to 'male-specific' reactions, such as control, coolness and determination (Fisher & Ryan, 2021; Hennekam & Shymko , 2020). These ideas support the role of gender stereotypes and social discourses that fuel these inequalities, being generally promoted in society. In the educational system, despite efforts to promote equality, the influence of these discourses that come from outside the educational system cannot be ignored. Moreover, the concept of 'invisible power' (Foucault, 1979, p. 214) supports the mechanism of maintaining certain behaviors, beyond formal norms, being all the more 'dangerous' as it is a mechanism that acts at the unconscious level and 'normalizes' certain ideas conveyed within the community, turning them into unwritten laws.

OBSTACLES TO ASSURING EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Although there is legislation that could facilitate the implementation of measures to reduce gender inequality in schools, efforts are hindered, on the one hand, by realities that deepen gender differences, such as poverty, paternalistic communities that promote gender stereotypes, and, on the other hand, by educational obstacles generated by the lack of methodology to implement in schools the guidelines included in the legislative measures to promote gender equality, the lack of teachers' skills and training in this area, due to the complexity of the issue under discussion (Aragonés-González *et al.*, 2020).

The lack of guidance towards the support of actions that maintain gender equality, as stakeholders are rather concerned with the identification of factors that encourage gender inequality and the lack of women's involvement in decision making, is considered to be a cause of failure in the fight for gender equality, the main criticism being directed at the manner in which decisions are made, i.e. at the top, 'far from those who would be most affected by their implementation' (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 398), and at the insufficient actions addressing the structural issues that fuel discrimination and inequality, including unpaid work, violence against women and the minimization of their sexual and reproductive rights, lack of education, poverty etc. Therefore, concrete actions are needed to 'challenge dominant discourses and prescriptive policies' (p. 398) and do more than just 'texts and discussions', and to address more general issues, recognizing and addressing 'power relations that generate situations of discrimination and inequality' (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 399).

In terms of gender, equality may be operationalized on four dimensions (EQUATE, 2008) which refer to three types of rights: to education, in education and through education (Subrahmanian, 2005; (UNESCO), 2003): access, learning process, learning outcomes and external (school) outcomes. The aspects that undermine assurance of equity in education may be summarized based on these four dimensions.

Obstacles to Access to Education

According to UNESCO (2003), gender differences in terms of access to education are not only due to poverty – this affects general access to education, although there are also poor countries where these inequalities are not present – but also to culture: the low level of enrollment of children in school correlates with the inequality between school enrollments of girls and boys. With a few exceptions, the lower the enrollment rate in school, the more disadvantaged the girls, the difference seeming to reflect primarily the inequalities existing in the standards and rules of each society, which are diverse among the groups that make it up. When this point is reached in discussions, the responsibility for encouraging (or discouraging) girls' attendance of school rests with their family, which preserves and transmits gender-related values and practices, which in turn may be influenced by the characteristics of the environment in which it operates. For example, the assignment of roles in the family at times of crisis or lack of opportunities - for further employment - may prioritize certain routes of development for each child in which only boys (or first-borns) are provided with the necessary resources (to go to school or attend higher education). However, although this option seems rational from an economic standpoint, it is extremely unequal because it has nothing to do with the qualities, talents or skills of those concerned.

Another scenario where access to education is limited by economic and cultural factors is when children are prevented from attending school or encouraged to drop out when they are used as labor inside or outside the household. According to UNESCO data, worldwide, parents are the main employer of working children, who 'give a helping hand' especially in agricultural farms. Even when household work does not directly lead to school dropout, it still impairs on the quality of the child's or adolescent's learning. Although both girls and boys are affected by this process, it

manifests itself differently for each of them. Whereas boys are destined for hard work, girls are most often seen as helpers or substitutes for their mothers, and, in some cultures, they are prepared from an early age to assume the roles of wives and mothers. In these situations, marriage is traditionally seen as a form of securing the girls' future, as it is considered much more secure than education.

Last but not least, another obstacle to access to education that almost exclusively affects girls is the pregnancy of teenage girls who follow both culturally transmitted roles - of mother, wife, main carer of children - and are the victims of poor sexual education, a phenomenon that also affects Romania. Teenage pregnancies in Romania have been associated both with the level of education, as more than three times more pregnancies occur in poorly educated people than in those who completed compulsory education or attended high school education, and with people's place of origin, as the number of teenage girls under 16 who become mothers is almost double in rural areas than in urban areas, a ratio that reverses after the mentioned age (Nanu *et al.*, 2021).
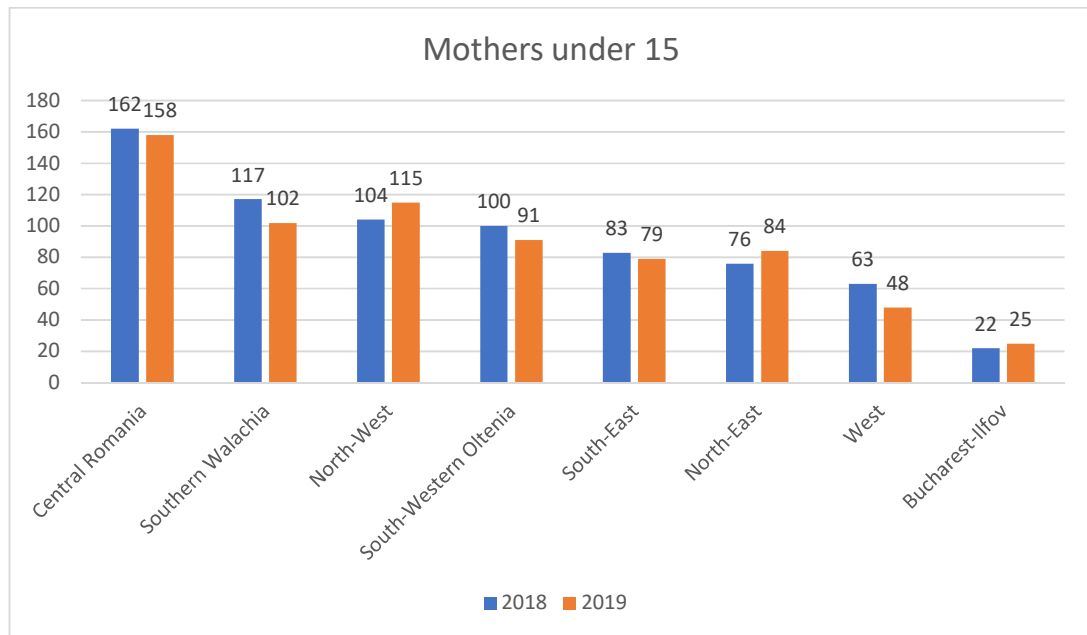
Figure 3. Number of live births to mothers under the age of 15 (*Source:* Nanu *et al.*, 2021)

Although the statistical data collected in Romania about the phenomenon of teenage pregnancies show a decrease in 2019 compared to 2018, namely from 18,000 to 16,639, the number of mothers under 15 increased in 2019, in North-Eastern and North-Western Romania, as one may see in *Figure 3* (Nanu *et al.*, 2021).
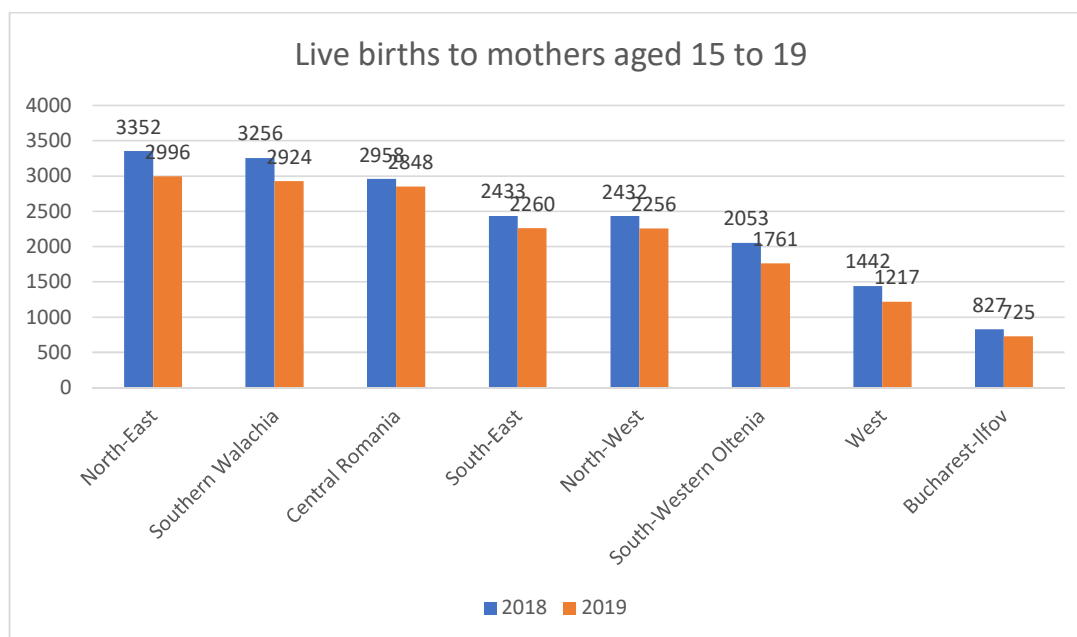
Figure 4. Number of live births to mothers aged 15 to 19 (*Source:* Nanu *et al.*, 2021)

As concerns the number of teenage girls who become mothers between the ages of 15 and 19, a decrease can be seen in 2019 compared to 2018, from 18 753 to 16 987, as shown in *Figure 4*, which applies this time to all geographical areas, but the very high number of teenage girls under 15 who become mothers is worrisome, with as many as 727 births in this age category in 2018 and 702 in 2019 (Nanu *et al.*, 2021).

Given the extent of this phenomenon also in Romania, which ranks among the top two countries of the European Union in terms of the phenomenon of teenage births - the number of births per 1000 girls aged between 15 and 19 was 34 in 2016, compared to Denmark, for example, with a birth rate of 1.5 per thousand in the same age category - (Nanu *et al.*, 2021), it is worth researching whether this phenomenon is not by any chance the result of one or more exclusions of another nature - economic, social - to which these girls fell victim and who chose this method to manifest their last bit of independence.

Each of these factors that limit or hinder children's and especially girls' access to education is worsened by the inequalities that already exist in society as a whole, such as those generated by the differences between urban and rural areas, or by the practices, traditions and norms of each ethnic or cultural group making up our society. For instance, studies are cited that show that in cases of domestic violence, the extent to which education has a positive impact depends on the social rules and norms that govern women's lives and their economic level. In a study carried out in India, the role played by education in reducing the phenomenon of domestic violence was greater in less patriarchal communities (Jejeebhoy, 1998).

Although they are important, essential even in some contexts, cultural obstacles are not the only ones that hinder or prevent access to education. For example, school, no matter how 'free' it is, costs money, and these costs are all the more burdensome the poorer the family or community. As we have seen, if people do not have the money to send their children to school, they will stop doing it, and the first victims of this 'prioritization' are girls. But even when the community is poor, it does not invest in schools, and education continues to be unattractive. Romania faces another phenomenon that follows the depopulation generated by the decrease in the birth rate and

migration abroad. With the decrease in the number of school-age children, some education institutions are closed or merge with others, while it is even harder for the few remaining children to attend school. Even when there are means of transport to take children to and from school over longer distances, costs increase and schools become economically even less attractive. Therefore, an unpopulated community ends up being either abandoned by the young or completely uneducated.

Obstacles to the Learning Process

Obstacles to the learning process may arise from the lack of equal treatment and learning opportunities for girls and boys, which may materialize in content (curriculum), teaching and learning activity, classroom and school dynamics (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2007) and conditions provided by schools, aspects that are considered relevant for the learning process.

Conditions Provided by Schools

Even when access to education is assured, the child is not necessarily on safe ground. School may be an 'oasis' of positive values in an intolerant and discriminatory community, but it may also be an environment where such attitudes and practices emerge and thrive. Although there is not enough data on the phenomena of school violence in Romania, which ranks among the top five countries in Europe in this respect (Borș et. al., 2022), this phenomenon is regularly reported in the media, the most frequent forms of school violence being: pushing, reported by 68% of the students, various insults as a form of verbal aggression, reported by 67.7% of the students, and threats of physical violence or other forms of punishment, reported by 44% of the students (Stan, 2014). Moreover, a study carried out in 2022 in which, along with schools from Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, a number of 15 schools from Romania were involved, has revealed that the involvement of gender aspects in school violence is not a familiar subject to either students or teachers, and the most common forms of violence against girls are harmful sexual behavior, bullying and physical violence. The authors believe that school violence is maintained by a number of gender stereotypes such as: 'girls must be protected by boys, they are obedient and good, they ask for help, they are gentle and not aggressive, they get good marks, they are hardworking and calm, they can cry and must be obedient' (Borș *et al.*, 2022, p. 25). Behaviors involving sexuality such as dirty language and inappropriate touching are also reported to be encouraged and to go unpunished. As far as boys are concerned, bullying is recognized as violence by teachers and students alike, along with physical violence, as it is only 'natural' for boys to show off their strength, thus completing the opposite image of girls, that of strong individuals (Borș *et al.*, 2022).

We should also mention in this respect the cross-sectional study carried out in Romania, which shows that 35% of respondents experienced parental violence during childhood, 53.7% were victims of domestic violence, one of the most frequently reported forms of violence experienced being women's psychological abuse of men, reported by 45.01% of them (Rada, 2014), which may be a significant aspect related to school violence, as primary socialization contributes to the formation of gender identity and to the taking in of the roles assigned to women in relation to men (Sandu, 2016). Gender-based interaction models are thus developed, which manifest themselves in the process of secondary socialization.

Since the phenomenon of school violence is insufficiently addressed in Romania, we may only assume that this phenomenon exists and that the main victims of bullying, physical and sexual violence in school are girls, but these are only assumptions.

Curriculum

Assumptions about what is appropriate and inappropriate for girls and boys to learn influence the content of education. For example, the belief that girls are not good at math or/and boys are not good at housework may influence the curriculum and subsequently students' interest in various

fields of study. Likewise, the 'silent', tacit acceptance of information that refers to gender inequalities or even the encouragement of such practices through irony only supports and perpetuates such sexist attitudes.

An additional issue which supports and perpetuates gender inequalities is the more or less conscious transmission of gender stereotypes within formal education (Parii, Ceciliani, 2019). The concept of hidden curriculum refers to the transmission of a parallel message to the formal message, through teachers' behaviors and attitudes as attitudinal or interaction models, on the effects of which awareness should be raised and which should be prevented through actions designed to recognize involuntarily-transmitted gender stereotypes (Parii, Ceciliani, 2019).

In addition to the formal educational aspects, indicated in the formal educational context, the aspects transmitted through 'parallel education' (Chen, 2015, p. 7) describe the concept of 'hidden curriculum', which is defined as the involuntarily transmitted content during the education process (Kohlberg, 1980; Chen, 2015). Paradoxically enough, 'parallel education', which takes place within formal education, in the process of socialization of students, contradicts with what is taught in school in relation to certain situations and leads to the development of authority interaction models as a result of 'lessons of power and obedience' (Chen, 2015, p. 11), admitting as natural reactions certain reactions to defend one's extracurricular rights, which in school are seen as 'insolence' and punished. Everyday events in school contribute to the development and strengthening of the 'hidden curriculum' (Dreeben, 1976; Kohlberg, 1980), which may also involve aspects of organizational culture, being seen as the 'unseen' part of moral education implicitly taught by teachers, which is influenced not only by one's own moral values but also by the school's specific social context, transmitted along with the teaching rules and norms.

Teaching and Learning Dynamics in the Classroom

Even the best or most appropriate curriculum is implemented by teachers who have their own convictions. For example, if some of them have low expectations of girls, they pay less attention and provide less feedback to them compared to boys. This may induce a low level of expectations for female students who thus 'confirm' teachers' expectations (OECD & PISA, 2015; Sălăvăstru, 2004). In this process of self-confirming prediction, teachers may play a negative role, but they may also be the ones who break the vicious circle.

Obstacles to Learning Outcomes

An obstacle to assuring equal opportunities to achieve outcomes that are based solely on the individual talents and efforts of girls and boys is the influence of gender differences or stereotypes in terms of academic qualifications, types of degrees, assessments, delivery of information and educational content during schooling. The process of assessment of the pupils' and students' outcomes should not reflect gender stereotypes and should be designed to encourage the equal participation of both girls and boys.

Obstacles to External Outcomes

Numerous studies show that girls seem to do better in school than their male peers (OECD & PISA, 2015; UNESCO, 2003), a trend that has also been noticed in Romania (Hatos, 2006). However, this is no longer the case after they graduate. As we have already mentioned, women mainly focus on fields of higher education that are not related to science, finance and banks, but rather choose fields related to education and health (UNESCO, 2003) as the general belief is that they have more chances of employment in these fields (Baker & Perkins Jones, 2005). This is one of the reasons why they earn less money than men. However, even when they choose the same career paths as men, they still earn less than men. A recent study by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) Romania (Munteanu *et al.*, 2022) carried out on *a sample of private, medium or large, multinational or local companies,*

with more than 250,000 employees, shows that the real wage gap between men and women in our country is 23.3%, while the bonus gap is as high as 30%. The most significant gaps in the core sector were in banking (29.4%) and technology (29.1%) companies. This phenomenon, which is neither present nor very obvious in all Romanian economy industries, may be accounted for as follows:

- Discrimination is not direct, but results from a lack of opportunities (for women) to access well-paid positions and jobs;
- Opportunities are reduced by the high share of unpaid work among women (house work and care). Motherhood is also 'punished';
- Cultural segregation of industries and professions;
- Possible (cultural) differences as concerns men's assertiveness in negotiating their rights.

ASSURING EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Despite the noticeable success achieved in terms of equality, seen as access to various services – education, health etc. –, over the last decades, progress is much more difficult to quantify when it comes to equity, as a qualitative component of education. There are equity and empowerment models that may be adapted according to cultural, social and economic characteristics, so that equality means more than the formalism of parity. These solutions refer to realities both inside the school and outside it, which are both intended to reduce inequalities, especially gender inequalities.

In terms of assuring equal rights to education, Tomasevski (2001) lists the four important concepts referred to by the United Nations working group, namely: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability, synthesized as follows:

The right to education may be assured through:

− *Availability*, which refers to funds allocated to fulfil human rights obligations, assuring the diversity and number of schools needed, appropriate for school age, education and training, recruitment and equal respect for labor rights and trade union freedoms for all teachers.
− *Accessibility*, which refers to the removal of all legal, administrative and financial obstacles, and discrimination regarding access to education, including obstacles to access to compulsory education.

The right in and through education aims:

− *Acceptability*, which refers to rights within the education process and means assuring minimum standards such as the quality, safety and health of the environment, the ability of parents to decide for their children, the concern for the language in which schooling is carried out and also the recognition of children as persons who have rights.

Adaptability, which refers both to the rights in education and through education, makes it necessary to include minority children in the schooling process, concern for the children of migrants or traveling parents, identifying and preventing situations in which children are forced to work, to marry or to enroll in the army (Tomasevski, 2001).

The analysis of the operationalization of equality on the four levels (EQUATE, 2008), namely access, learning process, learning outcomes and external outcomes, provides, in addition to obstacles, a series of conditions that could contribute to assuring equity in education.

Access to Education

Access to education is a must for assuring equality and means that girls and boys are given fair opportunities to gain admission to formal, non-formal or alternative forms of basic education.

The level of poverty should be reduced and the level of culture should be increased in order to reduce the gender gap in access to education, as poverty and poor cultural education are associated with inequalities in access to education (UNESCO, 2003). Thus, the family is considered important in encouraging the participation of girls in education and at the same time responsible for preserving and transmitting gender-related values and practices, which in turn may be influenced by the specificity of their environment, which suggests interventions in the discourses promoted by the social environment, assuring equal development paths for each child, even in crisis situations accompanied or not by various shortages, by making the most of the potential and abilities of each child, by encouraging them to attend school and by monitoring risk situations that could lead to school dropout. Actions to prevent teenage pregnancies are also necessary, by identifying social factors, such as their origin, and certain practices and traditions that could influence their access to education, by providing financial support to children from poor families to allow them to attend

school, as free schooling is a necessary yet insufficient factor, since it requires additional material support to needy families to cover any hard-to-bear expenses and the provision of free transport for children from rural areas to where rural schools have been merged, problems that have been reported in certain areas in Romania.

Analyzing the possible causes of the increase of inequity in relation to the phenomenon of domestic violence, specialists considered it important to take into account social norms and rules and the economic level when implementing policies designed to reduce domestic violence (Jejeebhoy, 1998).

Learning Process

Equality in learning means that girls and boys enjoy equal treatment and attention and have equal opportunities to learn. There are, therefore, certain aspects related to overcoming the obstacles that prevent assuring a gender-fair learning process, aspects related to content (curriculum), teaching and learning, dynamics in the classroom and in school (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2007) and conditions provided by the school.

Conditions Provided by the School

An important aspect able to contribute to a fair learning process is the identification of factors that can strengthen or frustrate the effort to ensure equal conditions in school for girls and boys, which also involve values promoted in school, phenomena that favor violence and bullying in school etc.

Curriculum

When analyzing the weaknesses of the school environment, it is important to identify and be aware of the existence of a hidden curriculum, which can subtly encourage gender-based inequality and inequity, despite formally assumed efforts to reduce differences between girls and boys. Therefore, it could be useful to address the individual potential of girls and boys, regardless of gender, to combat information that refers to gender inequalities and to eliminate practices of irony and mockery, to discourage sexist attitudes.

Teaching and Learning Dynamics in the Classroom

As far as teaching and learning dynamics in the classroom is concerned, it is important to be aware of and control the expectations and beliefs that teachers have about the different performance of girls and boys and to give them equal attention and feedback. Thus, the teacher can break the vicious circle of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Assuring equality through the learning process means that boys and girls are exposed to the same curriculum, be it customized according to individual abilities (according to the criterion of personal potential and not that of gender); learning methods and materials must not contain gender stereotypes; everyone must be free to learn, explore and develop their skills in any academic and extracurricular field.

Learning Outcomes

Girls and boys should have equal opportunities to achieve learning outcomes that are based solely on their individual talents and efforts. Therefore, the length of schooling, academic qualifications, types of degrees, assessments, transmission of information and educational content should be devoid of any influence of gender differences or stereotypes, which is a real challenge.

Performance Outside School

Broadening the scope of analysis, education is no longer an end in itself and becomes a means for, for example, access to the labor market. Equality in education outcomes, seen as a means of access to the labor market, occurs when the professional status of men and women, access to goods and resources and the opportunity to participate in and benefit from economic, social, cultural and political activities are equal. This means equal opportunities in terms of jobs and careers, the time it takes for everyone to find a job after completing education and equal income for equal qualifications and experience.

In short, equality through equity in education requires complex intervention that takes into account assuring children's rights to education (access to school), to rights within education (assuring equality in terms of the learning and assessment process), and to the post-education world (access to the labor market, training women in entrepreneurship, leadership etc., facilitating access to exclusively male fields etc.). The customized operationalization of these rights and the actions to be implemented in order to observe them are summarized in *Table 2*.

Table 2. Operationalization of education rights to assure gender equality

Rights to education	Access	Schools located close to where children live Raising the awareness of parents about their responsibility as concerns their children's rights to education Reducing the financial burden of families by helping with the schooling costs
Rights in education	Equality in the learning process	Adapting educational contents (curriculum) to promote gender equality and discourage stereotypes Training teachers to support underprivileged students and/or students subjected to various types of abuse Improving safety in school and in its vicinity Encouraging girls to pursue technical subjects Discouraging the orientation of students' interests according to gender (girls towards literature and social sciences and boys towards science and technology) Encouraging the reintegration into school of students who for various reasons were forced to drop out (exploitation through work, marriage and/or teenage pregnancy etc.)
	Equality in education outcomes	Making teachers understand how their perceptions and expectations of student progress influence their students' performance Revisiting student assessment tools so that they are not affected by gender stereotypes Diversification of tools and ways of assessing students
Rights through education	Equality in performance outside school	Developing a legislative and action framework that assures equal work opportunities and equal pay Providing leadership training for women Promoting infrastructure improvements that encourage economic growth, poverty reduction, improved health and quality of life leading to the reduction of the burden placed on the shoulders of women and girls; Developing programs to remove implicit or explicit barriers to women's participation in non-traditional sectors of the labor market (including targeted recruitment, training and support for women)

As concerns the promotion of women to leadership positions, an area exterior to education but closely linked to it, the measure may have greater effects than achieving gender parity, namely the creation of social patterns, which are linked to role attributes derived from social positions held by women, opening up new possibilities for career development, contributing to diminishing the effects of gender stereotypes, promoting change in the social perception of women and the roles that women 'should' fulfill, as women are seen as 'main care providers', while men as income earners (Froehlicher *et al.*, 2021). It is believed that women generally give up work more easily blaming it on childcare issues. One solution to this problem would be flexible working hours, which seems to have decreased the number of women quitting work (Fisher & Ryan, 2021; Froehlicher *et al.*, 2021). However, it is worth noting that although flexible working hours could theoretically mean that men are more involvement in the household, it seems that during the lock-down mothers took of more household responsibilities than men, including childcare (Carlson *et al.*, 2020); Fisher & Ryan, 2021), to the detriment of fulfilling their work duties. In countries where gender equality and women's empowerment are poor, the effect of gender inequalities is more marked and domestic violence has increased (Fisher & Ryan, 2021). In countries dominated by traditional norms, expectations of a father who has flexible working hours in order to devote himself to child care are for him to continue to be active career wise, while the expectations of a mother in the same situation are that she devote herself more to children or household activities (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020).

Given the complexity of the social phenomena involved in the generation and maintenance of gender inequality, the specificity of the cultural spaces in which they manifest in a differentiated and unequal manner, it is difficult to identify unitary and general solutions, attempts to identify measures that had significant effects after implementation in the education system leading to the conclusion that, in order to promote gender equality, early interventions on the educational system are necessary, as schools have the ability to influence the value system they transmit; thus, one must identify and analyze gender inequality, modify academic contents that contribute to maintaining gender stereotypes, try to avoid discrimination and promote or perpetuate gender inequality (Aragonés-González *et al.*, 2020).

It is considered necessary to deconstruct the concepts that are circulated in an attempt to explain the phenomenon of gender inequality/equality, such as the concept of gender, which becomes flexible and separates from that of biological sex, that of 'empowerment' of women etc. the latter being able to fuel the discourse of women as 'more hardworking, more caring, more responsible and more attentive than men' (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 399), thus contributing to the development of other gender stereotypes that could lead to discrimination. It is therefore necessary to operationalize these concepts in order to generate applicable and effective measures in reducing gender differences between men and women.

If the effects of flexible working hours seem to be beneficial, there are some doubts related to the fact that it is house work in particular that fuels gender inequality and, despite attempts to involve men in house work, the effects are not what is expected because of 'cultural devaluation' (Fisher & Ryan, 2021). The effect of the gender stereotype on male identity is underlined, which diminishes men's desire to engage in house work, which is associated with femininity. Thus, this requires actions to encourage their involvement in such activities, as a kind of 'empowerment' of men to assume chores.

GENDER EQUALITY IN ROMANIA

The first law in Romania that addresses discrimination based on any criteria, including gender criteria, is ORDINANCE No. 137 of 31 August 2000, republished, on the prevention and punishment of all forms of discrimination, which underwent several subsequent amendments and clarifications, but the law that expressly contributes to the development of an institutional framework and that aims at equality between men and women is the law no. 202 of 2002, as amended and supplemented. All national and international efforts have emphasized the need to take into account the specific cultural contexts that can perpetuate gender inequalities, through the influence of customs, traditions, stereotypes and beliefs that shape not only attitudes and behaviors, but also certain normalizing interactional models, the challenge being generated by the need to identify those subtle and differentiated cultural realities that escape specific norms, including domestic violence, the victims of which are generally women.

The first name associated with the feminist movement in Romania was that of Cornelia Emilian, who set up the 'Reunion of Romanian Women' as early as 1867, thus contributing to the drafting of the Statutes of the Romanian Women's Reunion for the Education of Poor Girls, which founded the first girls' school in Iași in 1870 and the first Women's League in Romania in 1894. Although this association did not last more than 5 years, the founder is recognized as a militant for women's rights, whose work was continued later by her daughter and other women's groups. Although the actions of the league were along the lines of the 'educating mother stereotype', it should be noted though that, through their actions, the women's league drew attention to the disadvantaged position of women and triggered an important step towards access to education for disadvantaged women (Băluță & Cârstocea, 2002).

Women's Participation in Education and the Labor Market in Romania

This section is devoted to analyzing the statistics that describe women's participation in social life, spanning from their participation in education to their entering the labor market, as well as how they are affected by unemployment depending on their level of education. The data will be used to draw comparisons between women and men and/or between Romania and the European Union. When the data refer to the European Union, the statistics do not include the United Kingdom, regardless of the year to which they refer (EU 27).

Table 3. Population distribution (15-64 years) according to education and sex in Romania

	2014			2015			2016			2017			2018			2019			2020		
	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F
Level 0-2 (nursery-kindergarten-primary school-middle school)	31.2	29.1	33.3	29.4	27.4	31.4	28	26.3	29.8	27	25.5	28.4	26.3	25	27.6	25.1	23.9	26.3	23.7	22.4	25.1
Level 3-4 (high school and college)	54.6	57.3	51.9	55.6	58.3	52.8	56.9	59.5	54.2	57.7	60.3	55.1	58.2	60.7	55.7	58.9	61.3	56.4	60.1	62.6	57.5
Level 5-8 (higher education)	14.2	13.5	15.8	15	14.2	16	15.1	14.2	16	15.3	14.2	16.5	15.5	14.3	16.7	16	14.8	17.3	16.2	15	17.5

(*Source:* Eurostat)

Table 4. Population distribution (15-64 years) according to education and sex in the European Union

|	2014			2015			2016			2017			2018			2019			2020		
	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F
Level 0-2	28.4	28.7	28.1	27.9	28.3	27.4	27.4	27.9	26.8	26.9	27.5	26.2	26.3	27.1	25.6	25.7	26.6	24.9	25.1	26.1	24.1
Level 3-4	47.1	48.3	45.8	47	48.4	45.6	46.9	48.3	45.6	46.8	48.2	45.4	46.5	48	45.1	46.3	47.7	45	46	47.4	44.5
Level 5-8	24.5	23	26	25.2	23.4	26.9	25.7	23.8	27.6	26.4	24.3	28.4	27.1	25	29.3	27.9	25.7	30.2	29	26.5	30.2

(*Source:* Eurostat)
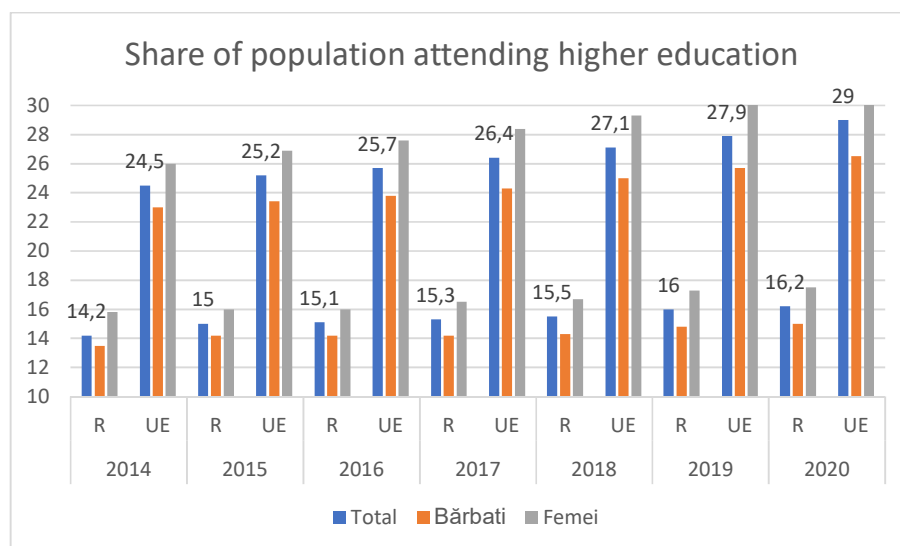
Figure 5. Share of population attending higher education in Romania and in the European Union, per sexes, between 2014 and 2020 (*Source:* Eurostat)

According to the data above, both in Romania and in the European Union, the share of girls (out of the total number of women who follow a form of education) enrolled in higher education is higher than that of men. *Tables 3* and *4* show that for the age category considered here, 15-64 years, the share of individuals who only attended levels 0-2 (less than high school) is much higher in Romania than in the EU. In fact, in Romania, in general, the share of higher education graduates is much lower than in the EU. Consequently, the share of female students is much lower in Romania than in the European Union.

Fields of Study in Higher Education

		2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Education	EU									1.6	5.9	1.6	5.9
	R	0.1	1.8	0.2	2.5	0.3	2.8	0.3	2.9	0.3	3	0.3	3
Arts and Humanities	EU									4.2	7.8	4.2	7.9
	R	3.5	5.6	3.5	5.6	3.5	5.7	3	5.6	3.5	5.6	3.4	5.6
Social Sciences and Journalism	EU									3.5	6.2	3.4	6
	R	4.4	9.6	2.5	6.1	2.5	6.2	2.5	6.1	2.5	6.3	2.5	6.3
Business, Administration and Law	EU									10	12.1	9.8	12.1
	R	8.7	14.3	9.2	16.1	8.6	15.4	8.7	15.2	8.9	15	9	15
Natural Sciences, Mathematics, Statistics	EU									3.6	3.5	3.5	3.5
	R	1.9	3.3	2	3.2	1.9	3.2	1.7	2.9	1.7	2.9	1.6	2.8
Computer Science and Information Technology	EU									4	0.9	4	0.9
	R	1.1	0.8	4.6	1.8	4.3	1.8	4.6	2	4.7	2.1	4.8	2.2
Engineering, Manufacture, Constructions	EU									11.6	4.2	12.2	4.4
	R	17.9	7.7	14.7	6.8	15.3	6.9	14.7	6.8	14.2	6.8	14	6.9
Agriculture, Forestry, Fish Farming, Veterinary Medicine	EU									1	1	1	1
	R	2	1.2	2.8	1.9	2.9	1.9	2.9	1.9	2.8	1.9	2.6	1.9
Healthcare and Social Services	EU									3.8	9.6	3.8	9.5
	R	4.3	8.6	4.1	8.5	4.1	8.8	4.4	9.2	4.4	9.4	4.2	9.5
Services	EU									2.2	1.9	2.6	2.4
	R	2.2	0.7	2.7	1.2	2.8	1.2	1.2	2.8	1.3	29	2.9	1.3

(Source: Eurostat)

Table 5. Share of population attending higher education on fields of study and sexes in Romania and in the European Union (2014 – 2019)

The table above shows that there are still fields of higher education that are strongly feminized (education, arts and humanities, social sciences and journalism, business, administration and law, natural sciences, mathematics and statistics, health, and social services), while others continue to be attended mainly by men (computer science and information technology, engineering, manufacture and constructions, services). However, the weight of each field is aggregated from data from many other streams, so that within each there are significant differences between sub-fields. For example, we expect the high percentage of women in the field of 'Healthcare and Social Work' to be affected by the social work part or that of the field of 'Natural Sciences, Mathematics, Computer Science' by the natural science component. Until this data is refined, we find that few fields remain exclusively male-dominated, and even where this happens, women continue to penetrate those areas.

Employment rate

Table 6. Total employment rate of individuals aged from 20 to 64 years (population percentage) in Romania and in the European Union (2014-2021)

	2014			2015			2016			2017			2018			2019			2020			2021		
	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F
R	58	66.7	49.2	59.2	68	50.3	60.3	69.1	51.4	62.7	71.3	54	63.9	73	54.5	65.1	74.6	55.4	65.2	74	55.4	67.1	77	56.9
EU	67.5	73.1	62	68.5	74.1	63	69.6	75.2	64.1	70.9	76.5	65.2	71.9	77.6	66.3	72.7	78.3	67.1	71.7	77.2	66.1	73.1	78.5	67.7

(Source: Eurostat)
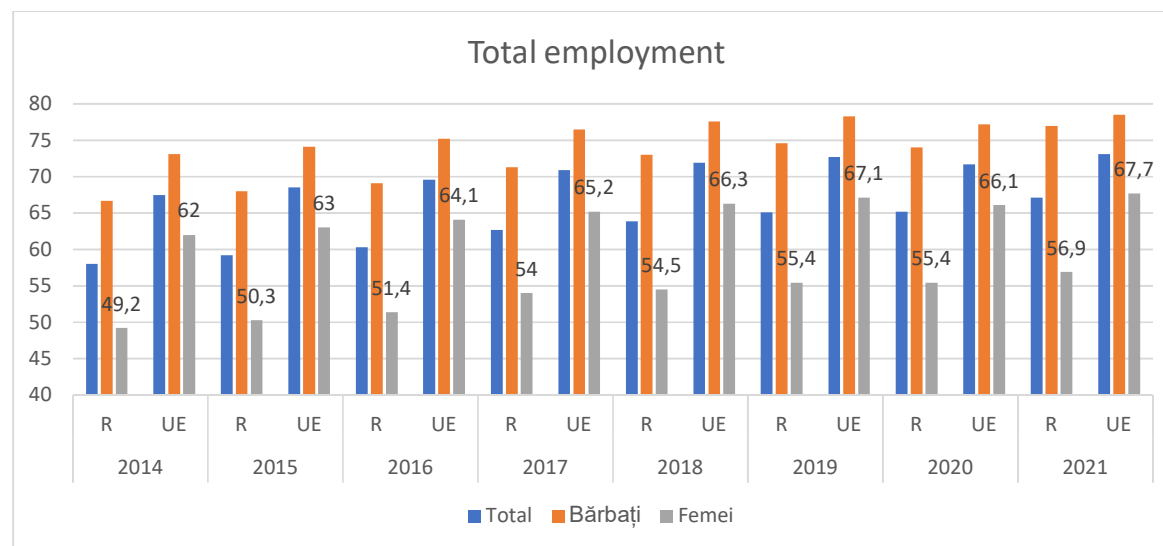
Figure 6. Total employment rate of the population aged from 20 to 64 years, per sexes, in Romania and in the EU (population percentage) (*Source: Eurostat*)

The table and chart above (*Table 6* and *Figure 6*) show again some comparable data between Romania and the European Union in terms of the total employment rate. First, one may notice that the total employment rate, for both men and women, is lower in Romania than in the European Union. There is, however, a slight narrowing of this gap as a percentage of the total population. As concerns women's employment rate though, the gaps between the EU and Romania are relatively significant in the general population and continue to remain so over the years. Between 2014 and 2021, the gap between the percentages showing the share of women aged 20-64 who have a job in the EU and Romania decreased from 12.8 (2014) to 10.7 (2020) and 10.8 (2021).
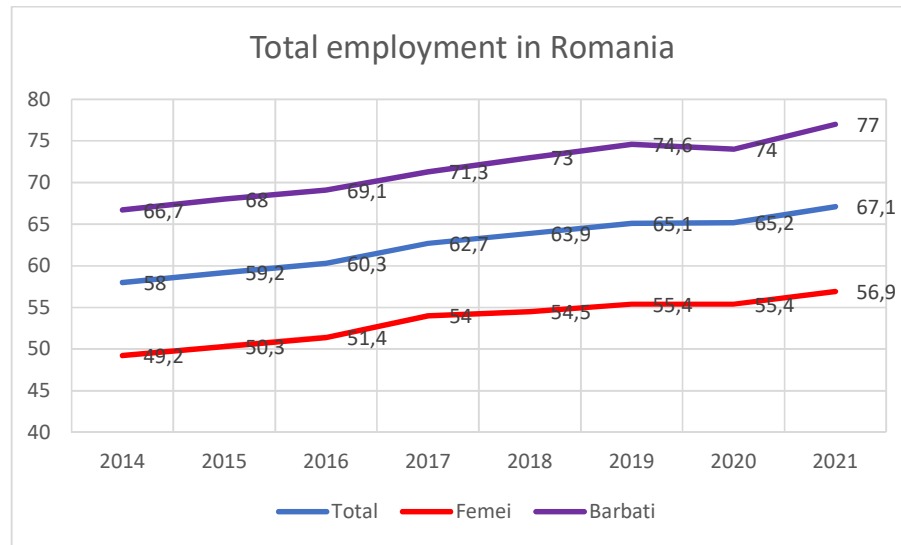
Figure 7. Evolution of the total employment rate of Romanians aged 20 to 64, per years (population percentage) (*Source:* Eurostat)

According to the chart above *(Figure 7)*, at least in our country, there is no significant improvement in women's employment rate compared to men's, as employment rate increase closely follows the general growth rate. Therefore, if this trend persists, the gaps between working women and men will also persist.

Table 7. Total share of employed individuals aged between 20 and 64, at each level of education (percentage of total employees) in Romania and in the European Union (2014-2021)

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R
Level 0-2 (nursery-kindergarten-primary school-middle school)	18	17.3	17.6	15.6	17.3	14.6	17	13.9	16.7	13.4	16.3	13.2	15.7	12	15.1	11.9
Level 3-4 (high school and college)	50	60.9	49.7	61	49.5	62	49.2	62.8	48.8	63.4	48.4	63	47.6	64	47.5	64.6
Level 5-8 (higher education)	31.8	21.8	32.5	23.4	33	23.4	33.6	23.3	34.3	23.3	35.1	23.8	36.5	24	37.2	23.5

(*Source:* Eurostat)

Table 8. Share of employed women aged between 20 and 64, at each level of education (percentage of total employees) in Romania and in the European Union (2014-2021)

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R
Level 0-2 (nursery-kindergarten-primary school-middle school)	15.9	15.8	15.3	13.7	14.8	12.4	14.5	11.5	14.1	11	13.6	10.6	12.9	9.8	12.4	9.4
Level 3-4 (high school and college)	48.5	58.1	48.1	58.2	47.8	59.4	47.4	59.9	47	60.3	46.5	59.8	45.4	60.5	45.1	60.9
Level 5-8 (higher education)	35.5	26.1	36.5	28.2	37.2	28.2	37.9	28.6	38.8	28.7	39.8	29.6	41.5	29.8	42.4	29.7

(*Source:* Eurostat)

Table 9. Share of employed men aged between 20 and 64, at each level of education (percentage of total employees) in Romania and in the European Union (2014-2021)

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R
Level 0-2 (nursery-kindergarten-primary school-middle school)	19.8	18.3	19.6	17	19.4	16.2	19.2	15.7	19	15.1	18.7	15	18.2	13.7	17.6	13.7
Level 3-4 (high school and college)	51.3	63	51.2	63	51	63.9	50.7	64.9	50.4	65.6	50.1	65.3	49.5	66.5	49.5	67.2
Level 5-8 (higher education)	28.7	18.7	29.1	20	29.4	19.9	29.9	19.4	30.4	19.3	31.1	19.7	32.1	19.8	32.8	19.1

(*Source:* Eurostat)

Noticeable differences are found between employment rates by levels of education (*Table 7, Table 8* and *Table 9*).
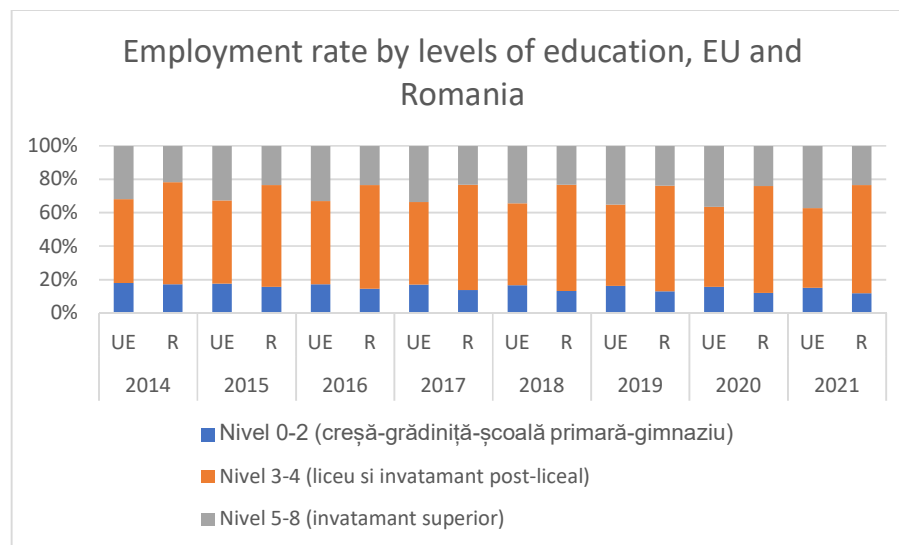

Figure 8. Employment rate by levels of education of the total population aged 20 to 64, in the European Union and Romania, between 2014 and 2021 (*Source:* Eurostat)

The chart above (*Figure 8*) shows a noticeable difference between the EU and Romania: whereas there are no noticeable differences between the two entities as far as employees with a low level of education (0-2) are concerned, in Romania there are many more employees who are high school or college graduates (level of education 3-4) than those who have a higher education degree. This gap is obviously also due to the fact that there are far fewer higher education graduates in Romania than in the European Union (*Table 3, Table 4*).

Figure 9 illustrates the difference for women. According to the chart data, in 2014, the difference between the EU and Romania was 9.4% in female employees holding a higher education degree. In 2021, the percentage had increased to 12.7. As in the case of total employment (Chart 3), in recent years no decrease of the gap between Romania and the European Union has been noted in terms of the change in the structure of employees according to their level of education. On the contrary, according to our data, the gap between Romania and the EU in terms of the percentage of women with higher education degrees who are employed continues to grow.

Employment rate by levels of education, women, EU and Romania

Year		
2021	R	29,7
2021	UE	42,4
2020	R	29,8
2020	UE	41,5
2019	R	29,6
2019	UE	39,8
2018	R	28,7
2018	UE	38,8
2017	R	28,6
2017	UE	37,9
2016	R	28,2
2016	UE	37,2
2015	R	28,2
2015	UE	36,5
2014	R	26,1
2014	UE	35,5

Nivel 5-8 (invatamant superior)

Nivel 3-4 (liceu si invatamant post-liceal)

Nivel 0-2 (creșă-grădiniță-școală primară-gimnaziu)
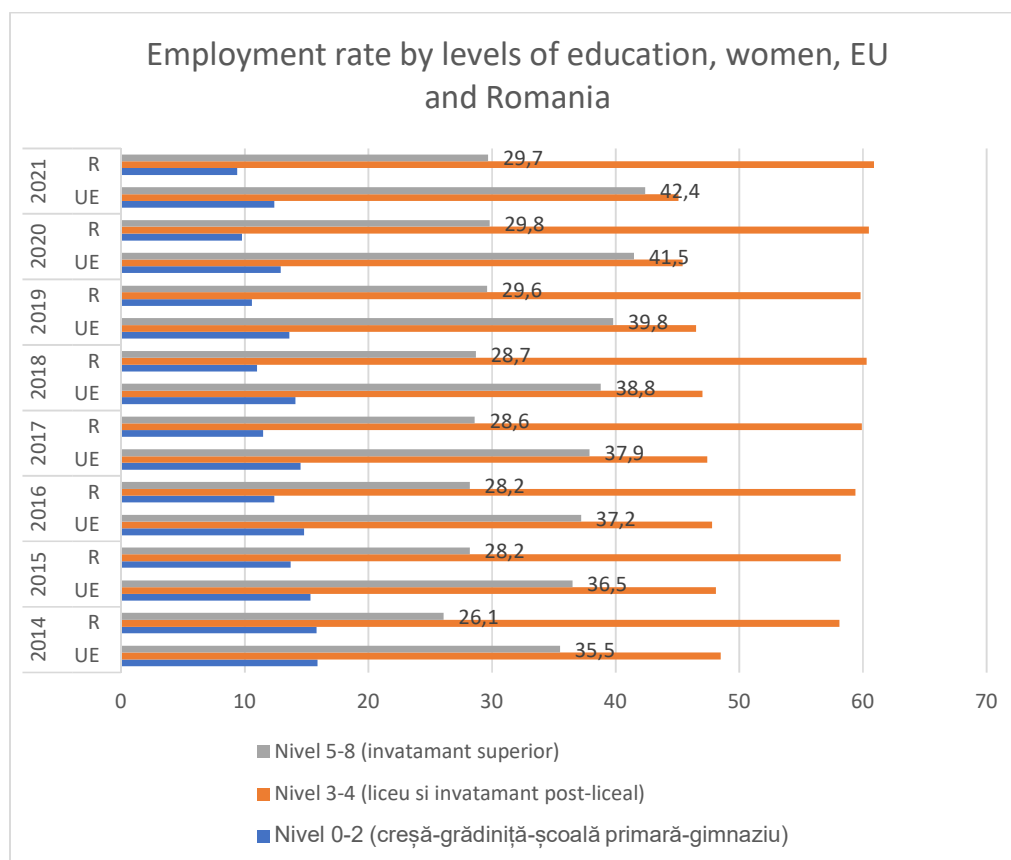
Note: The figure only shows the higher education percentages

Figure 9. Employment rate by levels of education of women aged 20 to 64, in the European Union and Romania, between 2014 and 2021 (*Source:* Eurostat)

Unemployment

Here is a comparison between Romania and the European Union in terms of unemployment meant to determine the differences between the two entities as concerns the incidence of the phenomenon by sex.

Table 10. Unemployment by sex, percentage of the population aged 20 to 64 years

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU
Total	8.3	10.8	8.1	10	6.8	9.1	5.8	8.1	4.9	7.2	4.5	6.7	5.7	7.1	5.3	6.8
Men	8.7	10.7	8.8	9.9	7.6	8.9	6.6	7.8	5.5	7	5	6.4	6	6.8	5.6	6.6
Women	7.6	11	6.9	10.1	5.8	9.3	4.7	8.4	4.2	7.5	4	7	5.4	7.4	4.8	7.2
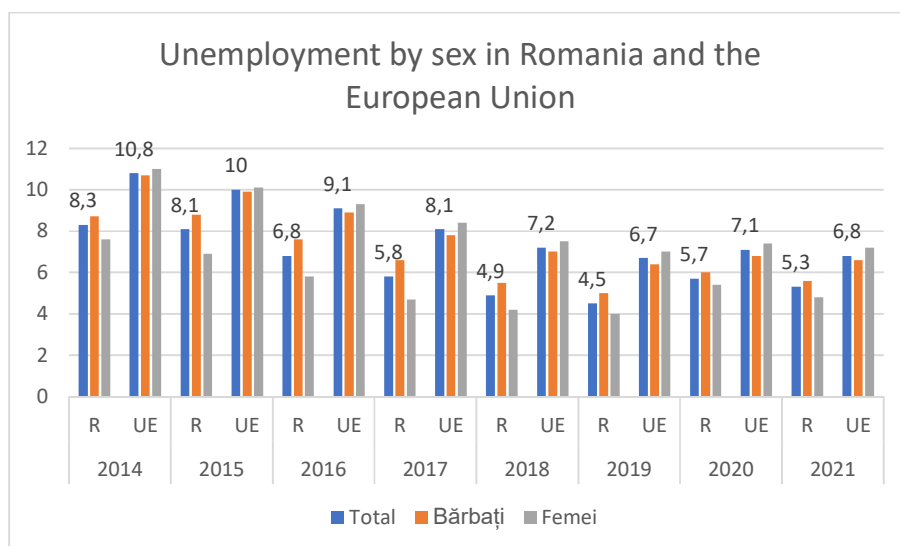
Figure 10. Unemployment by sex, percentage of the population aged 20 to 64 years (*Source:* Eurostat)

It can be seen from the data above (*Table 10* and *Figure 10*) that the unemployment rate in Romania is consistently lower than the average unemployment rate in the European Union. Moreover, whereas in the European Union unemployment among women is higher than among men, in Romania in all these years (2014-2021) the percentage of unemployed women was lower than that of men.

Also in terms of unemployment, we further describe how it affects women by levels of education.

Table 11. Unemployment rate by levels of education affecting women aged 15 to 74, in Romania and the European Union

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R	EU	R
Level 0-2 (nursery-kindergarten-primary school-middle school)	33.6	22.0	33.6	26.3	33.8	27.2	34.3	25.9	33.7	23.6	33.3	28.0	30.9	27.2	30.7	27.7
Level 3-4 (high school and college)	45.1	59.2	44.5	57.7	44.1	59.0	43.5	62.9	43.3	63.8	42.9	61.7	42.7	60.8	42.9	61.6
Level 5-8 (higher education)	21.5	18.7	22.1	16.0	22.2	13.9	22.3	11.2	23.0	12.6	23.8	10.4	26.3	12.1	26.3	10.7

(*Source:* Eurostat)
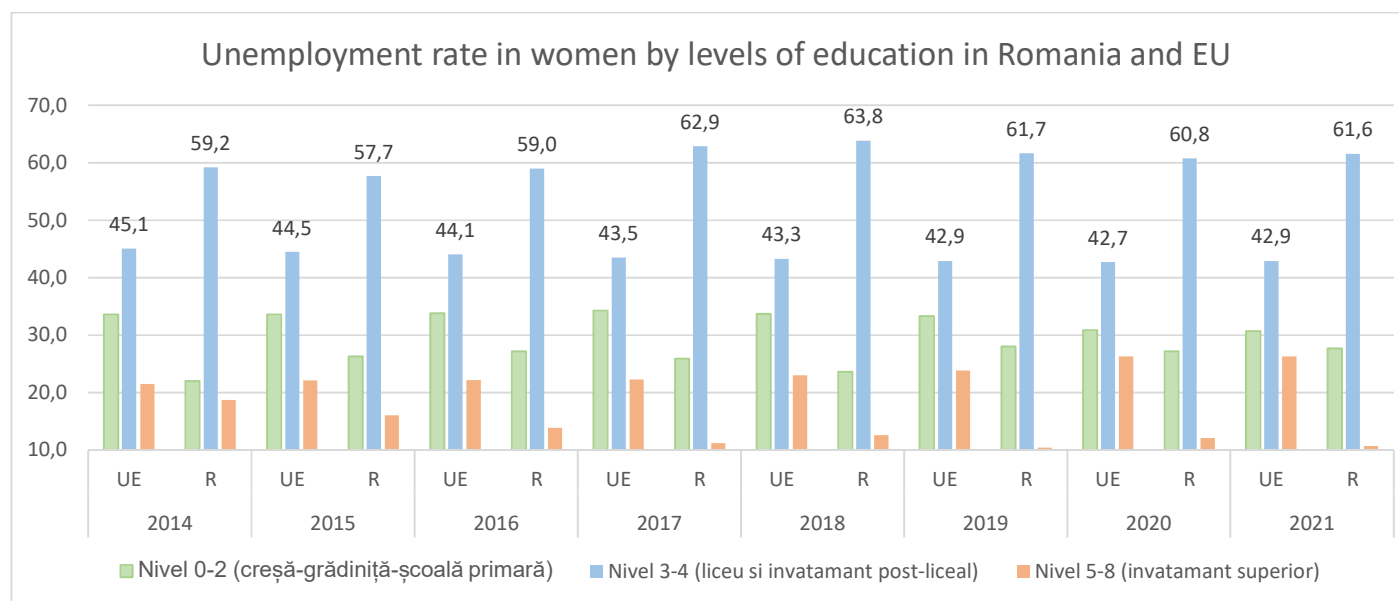
Figure 11. Unemployment rate by levels of education affecting women aged 15 to 74, in Romania and the European Union (2014-2021)

(*Source:* Eurostat)

According to *Table 11* and *Figure 11*, the women most affected by unemployment, both in the European Union and in Romania, are those with a level of education 2-4, i.e. high school or college graduates. One cause may be that the majority of women are included in this category of education (*Table 3* and *Table 4*). This also explains why the unemployment rate of Romanian women who are higher education graduates is much lower than that of their European Union counterparts. Inevitably, the labor market is a reflection of the education market: if the labor market is mostly occupied by high school graduates only, this category of education with have both the highest employment and unemployment rates.

As shown by the Eurostat data, Romania is still significantly behind the European Union in terms of involvement in education and the labor market. These differences do not necessarily predominate in women, but when present, women are primarily affected. As shown above, compared to the EU, Romania still has a lot of lower education graduates and very few higher education degree holders. Our country is in line with the European trend according to which there are more girls than boys attending higher education. As concerns studied fields, there are still – both in the EU and in Romania – strongly feminized fields and others that belong mostly to men. Later, on the labor and unemployment market, the trends created by the education system – in Romania, many high school graduates and few higher education degree holders – are preserved.

In the light of these data, a solution for Romania's alignment with the European Union in terms of education and employment, both in general and for women in particular, would be a restructuring of the type of jobs needed in the Romanian economy, with an emphasis placed on specialized jobs. At the same time, the education system should also be prepared for such a change of perspective, by providing specialists in leading fields. This training stage should be freed from gender stereotypes that obviously affect the different orientation of women and men in choosing fields in higher education and then in terms of employment.

GENDER IN THE PARENTING EDUCATION PROGRAM

Parenting Education: Introduction and Short History

Parenting education programs are an integral part of family support policies and are based on two principles (Carter, 1996): a) The best way to positively influence children's development and behavior is to act on their parents' beliefs, attitudes and behavior, as they are the earliest and closest educators of children; b) *Parenting* is learned and practiced and not innate or congenital.

Although there is no absolute consensus on the term parenting education, *in a broad sense*, it includes 'the programs, services and resources intended for parents and those who care for children, with the aim of supporting them and improving their ability to raise their children' (Carter, 1996). *In a narrower sense*, parenting education refers to programs that help parents develop and improve their parenting skills, understand child development, learn to reduce stress that can affect parenting, and learn to use alternative ways of approach to difficult situations encountered with children (Small & Eastman, 1991). Parenting education originated in healthcare, which focused on providing information to parents to assure their children's health. The book published by Dr. Benjamin Spock (*Baby and Child Care*) in 1946 quickly became a best seller. In the 1960s, under the influence of books by Erikson, Bowlby and Ginott, parenting education programs extend from healthcare to psychology, as parenting educators were the experts who were able to help parents understand their children's needs and learn to solve the problems they face in their relationships with their own children. The 1980s witnessed an accelerated development of parenting models, inspired by the social and cultural diversity perspectives (Carter, 1996).

In Romania, parenting education began to develop at the end of the 1990s, with the development of the first internationally inspired programs. In 1998, the 'How to Educate' (*„Educați așa"*) Program, developed by the Our Children Foundation based on a model created by the Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare (NIZW), consisted of a pilot program involving the Ministry of Education and Research, implemented in three counties. In 2000, with the support of Unicef, the program was developed for 5 years until it was implemented in all counties across Romania. Since 2005, the 'How to Educate' program has been taken over by the Ministry of Education and Research in 2000, as the National Program for Parenting Education in Preschool Education (Unicef, 2009).

In 2000, the program 'How to become better parents' (provided by Holt Romania) was developed focusing on parents with children aged 0-3 years, following the Birth to Three model created in the USA; after about 10 years of adaptation, it was extended to the category of parents with school children. This program also benefited from Unicef support from the very beginning, being a program with accelerated dynamics both in terms of adaptation for various categories of parents, and in terms of development of its own system for training, supervising and accrediting parenting educators (Unicef, 2009).

In 2004, the Romanian Association for Education and Development, in partnership with the Institute for Education Sciences and UNICEF, initiated the project 'Education of Future Parents', and developed auxiliary materials for the optional subject 'Education of Future Parents' for the 9th to 12th forms (Unicef, 2009).

National organizations providing parenting education programs imported such programs, inspired by various models, and adapted them for Romanian parents. The Save the Children program is based on the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program - model (developed by the University of Queensland, Australia) and implemented for the first time in Romania through the Counseling Centers in 2010.

The recent import of some parenting education programs, of some models developed in other cultures, went through stages of adaptation to the socio-cultural conditions of different categories of

parents; in this respect, parenting education program providers held training courses for parents, adapted the curricula to the specific cultural conditions of various categories of parents (parents with young children, with preschool children, with school children, teenagers, with disabled children etc.). At the local level, programs provided by local organizations are more eclectic, being inspired by those provided by national organizations and combined with diverse theoretical orientations (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011a).

Since 2011, the HoltIS Association has adapted the parenting education program to the different needs of parents depending on the age of their children, taking into account the appreciative approach. Following the research on the profile of parenting educators, carried out by HoltIS with the support of UNICEF, there have been major changes in the provision of parenting education courses, namely:

– Considering both social and geographical proximity (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011b), referred to by the parents when determining the profile of parenting educators, the latter were trained from among local specialists: teachers, social workers and community nurses.
– With the launch by UNICEF of the concept of *Quality Inclusive Education*, parenting education has become a component of the model that takes into account the three important actors in providing quality education, namely: the child, the school (through its teachers) and the parents.
– The HoltIS Association continued to develop new modules included in the curriculum for parenting educators and to adapt the qie.ro platform to provide proper management, monitoring and supervision tools for its parenting education courses.
– With the emergence of the COVID 19 pandemic, the HoltIS Association, together with UNICEF, made available to teachers in Romania, through the qie.ro platform, an online training system for parenting educators and for them to hold their education courses with parents (including online).

In addition to the implementation of national parenting education programs (Our Children Foundation, HoltIS Association, Step by Step, Save the Children), aimed at developing and supporting this field of intervention in Romania, UNICEF, the Ministry of Education, the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights, the Ministry of Health and the NGOs providing parenting education programs started the development of the National Parenting Education Strategy, and the Ministry of Education put it up for debate in two sessions, the last one being in April 2022.

In 2021 and 2022, HoltIS with the support of UNICEF held four Parenting Education sessions, on specific topics, which were dispensed with the support of teachers.

Table 12. Participation to parenting education modules in Romania, specific topics

No.	Session name	Year	Teachers	No. of attending parents
1	National session: How Do We Positively Address Child Behaviors?	2021	2,407	21,189
2	National session: Appreciative Parenting - Prevention of human trafficking	2021	2,792	10,100
3	National session: Immunity and vaccination. Useful information for parents	2022	929	4,874
4	National session: How can we understand gender equality?	2022	1,457	9,234
	Total no. of attending parents		**7,585**	**45,397**

The figures above are undeniable proof of the interest shown by teachers and parents in parenting education activities.

Parenting Education versus Parent Support

The goal of parenting education is to develop parent-child relationships by encouraging supportive parenting behaviors and modifying non-productive or harmful behaviors (Small, 1990). Parenting education programs generally focus on developing new, positive behaviors in parents, on the one hand, and on eliminating a series of behaviors that adversely affect any child's development, on the other hand. Small (1990) dwells on the differences between *parenting education* and *parent support*. As an independent entity or in combination with other programs, parenting education helps parents develop and improve their parenting skills, understand human development, alternate approaches to child rearing, and learn techniques to reduce stress that undermines functioning parenting (Small, 1990). Parenting education emphasizes both the improvement of parenting and the therapeutic component of reducing parenting stress. *Parent support* aims to enhance parents' ability to use resources outside the family for their own well-being and that of their children (Riley, 1994). We believe that these differences highlighted by Carter (1990) are useful for clarifying how parenting education responds to certain needs and produces certain effects. In Romania, there are often confusions regarding parenting education: any interventions on parents (counseling, moral support, support groups, information etc.) are often considered parenting education activities (Wyatt Kaminski et al., 2008).

As parents participate in parenting education programs, they become better able to provide more attentive child care. Informing people and their understanding the messages sent in various information campaigns is not enough to change behaviors. The most common examples in literature are those related to healthcare and overall lifestyle behaviors; thus, despite countless information and education campaigns, smokers do not change their behavior, people who assault their family members do not become less aggressive or violent, parents who neglect their children do not become more attentive to them etc. Causing changes in behaviors requires a complex understanding of culture, personal and social factors, assuring contexts of interaction and social control capable of motivating and supporting change.

Do we need parenting education? The advantages and limits of parenting education

The most common consequences of parenting education referred to in literature in general are: improving parents' knowledge of child development, needs and how they can be met, in such a way as to support the child's physical and mental health; informing parents about the children's

rights and how they must be observed; improving the parent-children communication skills, with the former realistically adjusting their expectations; improving the responsive and supportive attitudes of parents towards children, their ability to support children's empowerment through their positive discipline etc.

All these may be possible solutions for a series of significant social problems: child abuse, social problems of adolescents (drug use, delinquency etc.), school failure, youth violence; they also positively influence adults in terms of construction of parental identity and parental dignity, in terms of their social networks, which they energize, restructure and strengthen, and in terms of parent stress management and reduction (Goddard, Myers-Walls, Lee, 2004).

Although the benefits of parenting education are undeniable, it is not a panacea (Carter, 1996): it cannot solve poverty and its devastating effects on families, nor social inequalities or problems in the family and child welfare system etc.; however, it can improve parents' ability to provide a loving and healthy environment to their children, thus giving them a better chance in life.

Its focus on vulnerable and disadvantaged families is explained mainly by the fact that, in these families, children run risks of abuse, neglect, exploitation through work, violation of their fundamental rights etc. The need is better highlighted due to the fact that these categories of families are less exposed to institutional prescriptions regarding children's rights, they have fewer social interactions able to influence parental behaviors and skills. This may be the reason why parenting education courses, understood as activities able to ensure the context of some interactions between parents, seem to be more adapted to the needs of parents and more flexible in building *learning communities*. Within such contexts, parents can interact, share their own experiences, exchange ideas, solutions and beliefs, make comparisons between their own behaviors and those of other parents (Miller & Sambell, 2003). Parents involved in parenting education programs directly show their intention to *reduce the asymmetry of power* between the specialist (parenting educator) and the parent; parents believe that the main quality of a good parenting educator is being him/herself a parent. Thus, by comparison and similarity, by multiplying the number of people who share the same values, a context of legitimacy and a social framework is created that facilitates, on the one hand, the internalization of values, norms and prescriptions and, on the other hand, the experimentation of new behaviors.

Parenting education programs that take place within group meetings are considered to be *less invasive in the family environment*, because institutional prescriptions are moderated by the values shared by group members, and meetings between specialists (parenting educators) are not perceived as a form of control coming from the institutional field; in this case, parenting educators are seen by parents rather as facilitators, support persons and social role models.

The purpose of parenting education programs is to *support parenting*, seen as a set of educational attitudes and practices, which updates *parents' skills* (meaning it aligns them to the value system promoted in society). Parenting education aims not only at the development of both *practical* and *reflective skills*. The practical exercise of parenting is defined rather as a process of reflective practice and not just a set of practical activities or tasks to be learnt that rigidly define the roles of mother and father (Golding, 2000).

Difficulties in Determining the Effects of Attending Parenting Education Courses

It is difficult to accurately determine, using statistical methods, the change in parents' behavior towards their children as a consequence of their attending parenting education courses, mostly due to the distortion of parents' answers under the effect of social desirability (an effect enhanced by the parenting education course). The accurate quantification of post-course changes would probably require observational methods (live or recorded) carried out in the same family

environment over a significant observation time, before participating in parenting education courses, in order to identify behavioral patterns in the parents-children relationship and also a significant period of time after completing the courses, in order to determine the absolute changes.

There are effect invisibility or volatility reporting risks, due to the resistance to change of the family system (*especially when only one of the partners attends the courses*) and we may not immediately detect the changes in the parents' reflection on their relationships with their children. This happens especially when parenting education courses are mainly informative, without involving the parents in practical interactions during the courses (exercises, role playing etc.) and without experimenting in the family environment, as homework, a series of practices analyzed within the courses.

Some changes are noticeable in parenting education courses that involve several successive meetings with the same parents, both in terms of *language* and in terms of *re-signified behaviors in one's interactions with others* (Smith *et al.*, 1998). The interactions between parents developed during several successive meetings contribute to the occurrence of changes in the language of the participants (acquiring new expressions, shaping the definition of some situations, experiencing new frames of reference that are activated in certain contexts etc.).

Some programs are based on the assumption that *improving parenting skills* and connecting parents to their children's needs should lead to measurable improvements in child development. Studies conducted to correlate the effects of parenting education programs on parents with changes in child development have demonstrated that programs that produced short-term effects for parents have had an almost imperceptible impact on children's development (Brown, 2005). Therefore, in order to assure the sustainability of these skills developed during course participation, it is necessary to provide the conditions required for maintaining interactions between parents; according to our research, when support groups are organized in which parents who have attended a parenting education program participate, the effects of the courses persist for a longer period of time.

National Parenting Education from the Gender Perspective

Parenting Educators' Gender

The educators' gender is an indicator able to determine the involvement of teaching staff according to gender, both in parenting education training and in the organization of parenting education courses with parents.

Table 13. Distribution according to gender and county of trained parenting educators who organized parenting education courses

County	Educators / Female		Educators / Male		Total
	No	%	No	%	No
Alba	32	96.97	1	3.03	33
Arad	7	100.00	0	0.00	7
Argeş	33	100.00	0	0.00	33
Bacău	384	88.07	52	11.93	436
Bihor	19	100.00	0	0.00	19
Bistriţa-Năsăud	21	95.45	1	4.55	22
Botoşani	27	96.43	1	3.57	28
Brăila	20	86.96	3	13.04	23

Braşov	24	92.31	2	7.69	26
Bucureşti	50	94.34	3	5.66	53
Buzău	47	94.00	3	6.00	50
Călăraşi	9	100.00	0	0.00	9
Caraş-Severin	6	100.00	0	0.00	6
Cluj	23	100.00	0	0.00	23
Constanţa	34	97.14	1	2.86	35
Covasna	5	100.00	0	0.00	5
Dâmboviţa	30	96.77	1	3.23	31
Dolj	24	100.00	0	0.00	24
Galaţi	37	100.00	0	0.00	37
Giurgiu	5	71.43	2	28.57	7
Gorj	24	96.00	1	4.00	25
Harghita	5	100.00	0	0.00	5
Hunedoara	15	93.75	1	6.25	16
Ialomiţa	11	100.00	0	0.00	11
Iaşi	276	92.62	22	7.38	298
Ilfov	8	80.00	2	20.00	10
Maramureş	34	94.44	2	5.56	36
Mehedinţi	16	100.00	0	0.00	16
Mureş	10	90.91	1	9.09	11
Neamţ	27	96.43	1	3.57	28
Olt	11	100.00	0	0.00	11
Prahova	64	98.46	1	1.54	65
Sălaj	14	87.50	2	12.50	16
Satu Mare	18	100.00	0	0.00	18
Sibiu	11	100.00	0	0.00	11
Suceava	94	92.16	8	7.84	102
Teleorman	5	62.50	3	37.50	8
Timiş	10	90.91	1	9.09	11
Tulcea	18	100.00	0	0.00	18
Vâlcea	10	90.91	1	9.09	11
Vaslui	132	84.62	24	15.38	156
Vrancea	25	100.00	0	0.00	25
Total	**1,675**	**92.29**	**140**	**7.71**	**1,815**

Source: www.qie.ro

Here are some remarks on the gender of parenting educators throughout Romania:

‒ 92.29 % of the active parenting educators in Romanian schools are women, and only 7.71% are men;

‒ We would like to point out that the intervention, within the UNICEF projects, in Bacău County has carried special results; 24.2% of the 1,815 active parenting educators in Romania are from Bacău County. Moreover, whereas the national average of male parenting educators is 7.71%, in Bacău the average is 11.93%.

- There are also several other counties that have results above the national averages; for example, Iași County, which ran two county-wide projects, implemented by Iași Board of Education in partnership with the Holtis Association, one funded by Norwegian Funds and the other by POCU - European Funds, in which 298 parenting educators were trained, of which 7.38% are men.
- Another special situation is in Vaslui County, where a project funded by Norwegian Funds was developed and implemented by Vaslui County Council in partnership with the Holtis Association. In this county, 156 parenting educators from rural schools were trained, of which 15.38% were men.

Parenting Education Sessions Held by Parenting Educators

The total number of parenting education sessions uploaded on the www.qie.ro platform (since 2011) is 20,544, most of which were held in Bacău County (8,431 sessions, 41.04%), followed by Iași County (3,693 sessions, 17.98%) and Vaslui County (1,653 sessions, 8.05%). This is a significant number of meetings, considering the whole period; even so, as one may note, more than 171 monthly sessions have been organized on average in the last ten years.

If we refer to more intense periods 2016-2018, in which there were several projects that also promoted parenting education, mainly in the school environment, there were times when 27 parenting education sessions were organized daily on average.

Here are (Table 14) national statistical data about parenting education sessions held by parenting educators, by gender and county.

Table 14. Distribution of the number of parenting education sessions organized by parenting educators, by gender and county

County	Male Parenting Educator Sessions		Female Parenting Educator Sessions		Total
	No	%	No	%	
Alba	0	0.00	178	100.00	178
Arad	0	0.00	46	100.00	46
Argeş	0	0.00	231	100.00	231
Bacău	1,033	12.25	7,398	87.75	8,431
Bihor	0	0.00	141	100.00	141
Bistriţa-Năsăud	10	6.02	156	93.98	166
Botoşani	4	1.90	206	98.10	210
Brăila	0	0.00	130	100.00	130
Braşov	14	6.83	191	93.17	205
Bucureşti	30	9.90	273	90.10	303
Buzău	16	5.56	272	94.44	288
Călăraşi	0	0.00	85	100.00	85
Caraş-Severin	0	0.00	38	100.00	38
Cluj	0	0.00	171	100.00	171
Constanţa	0	0.00	219	100.00	219
Covasna	3	6.38	44	93.62	47
Dâmboviţa	0	0.00	164	100.00	164
Dolj	0	0.00	229	100.00	229
Galaţi	0	0.00	281	100.00	281
Giurgiu	26	31.33	57	68.67	83
Gorj	0	0.00	178	100.00	178
Harghita	0	0.00	36	100.00	36
Hunedoara	8	6.96	107	93.04	115
Ialomiţa	0	0.00	56	100.00	56
Iaşi	260	7.04	3,433	92.96	3,693
Ilfov	24	32.88	49	67.12	73
Maramureş	16	5.44	278	94.56	294
Mehedinţi	0	0.00	96	100.00	96
Mureş	7	11.86	52	88.14	59
Neamţ	0	0.00	129	100.00	129
Olt	0	0.00	88	100.00	88
Prahova	23	3.81	580	96.19	603
Sălaj	14	17.72	65	82.28	79
Satu Mare	0	0.00	150	100.00	150
Sibiu	0	0.00	67	100.00	67
Suceava	65	8.67	685	91.33	750
Teleorman	43	48.31	46	51.69	89

Timiş	15	24.19	47	75.81	62
Tulcea	0	0.00	240	100.00	240
Vâlcea	16	12.60	111	87.40	127
Vaslui	267	16.15	1,386	83.85	1,653
Vrancea	0	0.00	261	100.00	261
Total	**1,894**	**9.22**	**18,650**	**90.78**	**20,544**
Bacău	1,033	12.25	7,398	87.75	8,431
%	54.54		39.67		41.04
Iaşi	260	7.04	3,433	92.96	3,693
%	13.73		18.41		17.98 %
Vaslui	267	16.15	1,386	83.85	1,653
%	14.10		7.43		

Several remarks:

− Of all the 20,544 parenting education sessions, 90,78 % were held by female parenting educators (18.650 sessions) and 9.22 % by male parenting educators (1,894 sessions).
− 54.54 % of the national male parenting educator sessions and 39.67 % of the national female parenting educator sessions were held in Bacău County.
− 12.25 % of all the parenting education sessions held in Bacău County were organized by male parenting educators (while the national average is 9.22 %) and 87.75 % by female parenting educators (while the national average is 90.78%).
− Please note that Vaslui County boasts 16.15 % of male-organized sessions of all the parenting education sessions held within the county.
− The following counties have the highest shares of parenting education sessions held by male educators: Teleorman (48.31 % of the sessions held in the county), Ilfov (32.88 % of the sessions held in the county) and Giurgiu (31.33 % of the sessions held in the county).

Gender of Principals Acting Like Parenting Educators

The principals and deputy principals of the schools involved were also trained as parenting educators, in order to support and encourage fathers' participation in parenting education classes and to strengthen the integration of parenting education in school culture. In some cases, individuals holding management positions took on themselves to organize parenting educations courses with fathers.

Table 15. Gender of principals / deputy principals who are parenting educators

County	Male Parenting Educators (principals or deputy principals)	Female Parenting Educators (principals or deputy principals)	Total PEs (principals / deputy principals)
Alba	1	1	2
Bacău	3	17	20
Bihor	0	1	1
Brăila	1	2	3
Braşov	0	1	1
Bucureşti	0	1	1
Buzău	0	3	3
Constanţa	0	1	1
Dâmboviţa	0	1	1
Galaţi	0	2	2
Iaşi	0	3	3
Mehedinţi	0	1	1
Neamţ	0	2	2
Prahova	0	1	1
Satu Mare	0	2	2
Suceava	1	1	2
Timiş	1	0	1
Vaslui	0	2	2
Total	7	42	49

Gender of Participants in Parenting Education Courses

28,876 is the total number of participants in the national parenting education courses (with more than 7 sessions), of whom *23,482 are mothers* (81.32%) and *4,759 are fathers* (16.48%). For the other categories of participants (grandparents, tutors, specialist carers and other relatives), no data on the gender of the participants were requested or filled in on the www.qie.ro platform. Nonetheless, we should point out that 16.48 % of the participants were fathers, as compared to the much lower percentage of male participants in similar programs abroad, which was 5.9 %. This proves that, in Romania, the involvement of fathers in raising and caring for children tends to be more and more substantial. In total, *3,197 parent groups* were organized for which 20,544 sessions (meetings with parents on the topics of the parenting education program) were held throughout the country.

The table shows 3 highlighted counties in which the emphasis placed on parenting education courses extended to several communities; they were held within projects initiated in *Bacău County* by the UNICEF Representative, in which the parenting education component was carried out by the Holtis Association; *Iaşi County* boasts one project funded from Norwegian Funds, implemented by Iaşi Board of Education in partnership with the Holtis Association, and one funded by the European Union through POCU; and *Vaslui County*, where a project funded by Norwegian Funds, implemented by Vaslui County Council in partnership with the Holtis Association, was carried out.

In Bacău County, the parenting education courses were attended by 12,850 participants (44.5% of all the Romanian participants), Iaşi County saw 4,883 participants (16.91 % of all the

Romanian participants) and 1,793 participants were from Vaslui County (6.21%). This shows that when resources are allocated such models can be developed and not just as pilot projects; in fact, in the field of parenting education, the time of pilot projects has passed, and this means that the practices developed may be extended at the national level, if and only if public policies support these efforts.

Table 16. Distribution by gender and county of parents participating in the parenting education program

County	Parenting education groups	Total participants	Participants - fathers		Participants - mothers		Grandparents∗		Tutors∗		Specialist carers∗		Other relatives∗	
			N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Alba	33	233	32	13.73	194	83.26	4	1.72	0	0.00	0	0.00	3	1.29
Arad	7	62	6	9.68	49	79.03	2	3.23	0	0.00	3	4.84	2	3.23
Argeş	35	305	45	14.75	256	83.93	1	0.33	2	0.66	1	0.33	0	0.00
Bacău	1,140	12,850	2,863	22.28	9,889	76.96	56	0.44	16	0.12	12	0.09	14	0.11
Bihor	21	162	22	13.58	130	80.25	4	2.47	0	0.00	6	3.70	0	0.00
Bistriţa-Năsăud	30	197	13	6.60	179	90.86	1	0.51	1	0.51	2	1.02	1	0.51
Botoşani	39	292	26	8.90	263	90.07	1	0.34	0	0.00	2	0.68	0	0.00
Brăila	27	214	19	8.88	193	90.19	1	0.47	0	0.00	1	0.47	0	0.00
Braşov	29	278	43	15.47	228	82.01	4	1.44	0	0.00	3	1.08	0	0.00
Bucureşti	56	429	46	10.72	365	85.08	14	3.26	0	0.00	0	0.00	4	0.93
Buzău	59	502	51	10.16	425	84.66	13	2.59	0	0.00	8	1.59	5	1.00
Călăraşi	15	128	14	10.94	111	86.72	2	1.56	1	0.78	0	0.00	0	0.00
Caraş-Severin	6	48	5	10.42	43	89.58	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Cluj	25	203	22	10.84	181	89.16	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Constanţa	42	323	23	7.12	291	90.09	2	0.62	0	0.00	1	0.31	6	1.86
Covasna	5	67	9	13.43	58	86.57	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Dâmboviţa	33	238	9	3.78	221	92.86	6	2.52	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	0.84
Dolj	32	291	24	8.25	262	90.03	5	1.72	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Galaţi	43	377	15	3.98	359	95.23	2	0.53	0	0.00	1	0.27	0	0.00
Giurgiu	11	97	12	12.37	85	87.63	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Gorj	33	312	28	8.97	279	89.42	2	0.64	0	0.00	1	0.32	2	0.64
Harghita	6	51	9	17.65	41	80.39	1	1.96	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00

Hunedoara	21	183	11	6.01	165	90.16	4	2.19	1	0.55	1	0.55	1	0.55
Ialomiţa	12	82	11	13.41	67	81.71	3	3.66	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	1.22
Iaşi	619	4,883	731	14.97	4,041	82.76	49	1.00	12	0.25	16	0.33	34	0.70
Ilfov	13	81	10	12.35	62	76.54	6	7.41	0	0.00	0	0.00	3	3.70
Maramureş	54	395	43	10.89	345	87.34	7	1.77	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Mehedinţi	20	145	23	15.86	109	75.17	2	1.38	0	0.00	9	6.21	2	1.38
Mureş	11	87	8	9.20	76	87.36	3	3.45	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Neamţ	35	233	26	11.16	194	83.26	0	0.00	0	0.00	11	4.72	2	0.86
Olt	14	123	13	10.57	98	79.67	6	4.88	0	0.00	0	0.00	6	4.88
Prahova	91	744	69	9.27	615	82.66	14	1.88	9	1.21	29	3.90	8	1.08
Sălaj	16	104	7	6.73	92	88.46	3	2.88	2	1.92	0	0.00	0	0.00
Satu Mare	23	201	14	6.97	165	82.09	2	1.00	0	0.00	18	8.96	2	1.00
Sibiu	11	86	16	18.60	66	76.74	4	4.65	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Suceava	114	939	74	7.88	802	85.41	13	1.38	12	1.28	26	2.77	12	1.28
Teleorman	14	139	18	12.95	120	86.33	0	0.00	1	0.72	0	0.00	0	0.00
Timiş	12	104	16	15.38	85	81.73	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	3	2.88
Tulcea	35	405	42	10.37	356	87.90	0	0.00	3	0.74	0	0.00	4	0.99
Vâlcea	16	153	20	13.07	114	74.51	5	3.27	0	0.00	13	8.50	1	0.65
Vaslui	298	1,793	198	11.04	1,548	86.34	5	0.28	1	0.06	36	2.01	5	0.28
Vrancea	41	337	73	21.66	260	77.15	4	1.19	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total	**3,197**	**28,876**	**4,759**	**16.48**	**23,482**	**81.32**	**251**	**0.87**	**61**	**0.21**	**200**	**0.69**	**123**	**0.43**
Bacău	1,140	12,850	2,863	22.28	9,889	76.96	56	0.44	16	0.12	12	0.09	14	0.11
%	35.66	44.50	60.16		42.11		22.31		26.23		6.00		11.38	
Iaşi	619	4,883	731	14.97	4,041	82.76	49	1.00	12	0.25	16	0.33	34	0.70
%	19.36	16.91	15.36		17.21		19.52		19.67		8.00		27.64	
Vaslui	298	1,793	198	11.04	1,548	86.34	5	0.28	1	0.06	36	2.01	5	0.28
%	9.32	6.21	4.16		6.59		1.99		1.64		18.00		4.07	

* The gender was not clearly specified; Source: www.qie.ro

In addition to the counties referred to above, there are also other counties where parenting education projects were implemented, funded by the European Union, yet on a smaller scale (Argeș, Botoșani, Brăila, Buzău, Constanța, Dolj, Galați, Maramureș, Mehedinți, Neamț, Prahova, Satu Mare, Suceava, Tulcea and București).

Fathers accounted for 22.28 % of the total participants at county level, and 60.16% of the total male participants at country level. This is also due to the strategy designed to encourage fathers to participate by training school principals as parenting educators, as the authority and respect that they inspire to fathers made the latter participate in greater numbers to these courses.

In Bacău County, the parenting education courses were attended by 9,889 mothers, who account for 42.11 % of the total number of mothers participating in the courses at national level.

Although grandparents were not a direct target of these courses, the national average of participation of these senior citizens to parenting education courses was 0.87 % of the total number of participants. Moreover, two counties stand out with levels of participation of this category of trainees which were above the national average, namely Ilfov County, where 7.41 % of participants were grandparents, and Olt County, with 4.88 %.

Parenting education courses were also attended by tutors employed by social work institutions where the courses were held, with the highest participation rates in Sălaj County, 1.92%, Suceava County, 1.28%, and Prahova County, 1.21%, at a national mean rate of 0.21%.

Specialist carers from schools where parenting skills development courses were held also attended them, and their highest participation rates were: 8.50% in Vâlcea County, 4.84 in Arad County and 4.72 in Neamț County, with a national participation rate of specialist carers of 0.69 %.

As far as the participation of the children's other relatives is concerned, the highest rates of participation in parenting education courses were reported in Olt (4.88 %), Ilfov (3.70%) and Timiș (2.88 %) Counties; the national participation rate of the children's other relatives in parenting education courses was 0.73%.

CONCLUSIONS

Gender equality, which is part of the fundamental human rights, is a concept that has arisen from the need to assure and implement equal opportunities for development to women and men. It has proven to be an extremely complex social phenomenon, which relies on several social factors, and which requires a broader approach and the taking into account, in addition to assuring equal access to good quality education, identifying the structural causes inherent to the education system and also to the latter's underlying subsystems, such as the family, the labor market, the economic, political and social participation of women and men etc.

The condition of equality by parity reflects only a formal reality and thus remains a limiting statistical indicator, which guides the efforts to assure equal rights between men and women to the concept of equity, being considered more comprehensive and based on the maximum exploitation of individual potential regardless of gender, recognizing the differences between the biological characteristics of men and women.

Being at the intersection of practices, formal or informal norms, values and currents in society, the school remains one of the core institutional frameworks in which gender equality and inequality may go hand in hand, in both formal and less formal social interactions, being derived from gender-determined power relationships, supported, in their turn, by gender stereotypes. In order to counteract these trends, it is necessary to achieve equity by assuring the right (access) to education, the right within the education process (equality in the learning process and in assessment) and the rights generated by education (access to the labor market, political participation, entrepreneurship and leadership etc.).

The identification of socially-promoted gender stereotypes, both in and outside the school, as factors that determine and support gender inequalities, also draws attention to the social construction of gender, seen as a construct in social interactions that contributes to the development of multiple social realities, in which identity, including gender identity, recognized as one of the most important, becomes a social construct influenced by the cultural space where it originates, being the result of attitudinal, behavioral and relational prescriptions of social gender roles, which become both a result and a mechanism of forming gender-related discourses. As far as Romania is concerned, violence is still used to discipline both children and women, a practice passed down from generation to generation (Rada, 2014), which may contribute to maintaining gender discrimination, especially when associated with poverty and poor education, which makes it necessary to identify the factors whose approach could allow the adaptation of the efforts to assure gender equity by adopting measures related to access to education, assuring equality in the learning process and in terms of learning outcomes, but also in terms of achievements outside school, to the specific Romanian cultural background.

On the other hand, the data continue to show significant gaps between the European Union and Romania in terms of the share of population attending higher education. This tendency is also reflected in the structure of the workforce in our country, with more employees (and unemployed individuals) who are middle or high school graduates then their counterparts who are higher education graduates. Although unemployment among women in Romania is lower than among men, the number of unemployed Romanian women who only completed middle or high school is much higher than that of their EU counterparts. Finally, both the EU and Romania continue to have highly feminized or masculinized specialization fields and professions that are expression of cultural models that are still powerful in terms of gender differences, which shows the need for perspective and intervention changes that could lead to equality by equity not only in the sphere of education but in all the components of social life.

As for parenting education, it may obviously help strengthen parenting practices and even improve and adapt them to the new children's and parents' needs in today's society. The data on

the participation of fathers to parenting education show their involvement in their children's raising, education and caring, which goes beyond the traditional role assigned to them by common sense, according to which fathers have an instrumental role (focusing mainly on the family's external relations) and are less involved in their family. Statistical data for the whole country show that fathers have begun to play an important role in manifesting parenthood (the share of participating fathers is 16.48 %, which is considerably higher than the share of participation among their worldwide counterparts, where the average is 5.9 %). The Romanian society changes and this is an undeniable fact. In 2000, when the parenting education program began, the participation of Romanian fathers was below 3% of the total participants in the parenting education courses.

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