



# The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**The role of men and boys  
in advancing gender  
equality and breaking  
gender stereotypes**  
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Comments paper – Romania



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# The role of men and boys in advancing gender equality and breaking gender stereotypes in Romania

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## Abstract

After 15 years of EU membership, as far as the state gender policies are concerned, Romania still lacks a coherent and explicit focus on men's issues and men's involvement in advancing gender equality, with rather modest and scattered initiatives related mainly to violence against women and labour market policies. The absence of men as target groups in gender policies, on the one hand, and from academic critical analyses, on the other hand, is closely related to how "gender" has been conceptualised and theorised in the Romanian academia and official national strategies and how gender equality agenda has been institutionalised during the past years. However, lately, one can notice that the understanding of "gender" moves from a binary conceptualisation to a much more complex and nuanced perspective where gender identities, sexuality and intersectionality are becoming the main coordinates for a different and richer envisioning of gender equality.

## 1. Relevant country context

### 1.1 Data on gender norms and gender stereotypes

Men and boys' involvement in advancing gender equality and breaking gender stereotypes in Romania is a relevant topic mainly in relation to combating gender violence, facilitate gender equality on the labour market or when talking about the (re)conciliation of family and professional lives (work-life balance). Usually, it is done outside of a critical (pro)feminist analytical framework. This is strongly linked to the fact that, overall, at the level of the state policies, but also in the academic and activist milieus, gender equality was conceptualised in terms of targeting predominantly women. That is why an academic field of the studies on men, boys and masculinities is totally absent, being referred to only in the sporadic works done by few Romanian scholars with background in the field of gender studies. The absence of men and boys as target groups in gender policies, on the one hand, and from academic critical analyses, on the other hand, is also closely related to how "gender" was conceptualised and theorised in the Romanian academia and how gender equality agenda has been institutionalised in the last 15 years. Basically, the knowledge production in gender equality and gender theory was strongly shaped by the Romanian gender equality institutionalisation processes anchored in the European Social Fund/Structural Funds framework and the national political agendas.

Romania still copes with a less coherent integrated system of data collection on the diversity of domains of gender equality, at least in the ways defined by the EIGE's The Gender Equality Index as a tool to measure the progress of gender equality in the EU. Various authorities, including the National Agency for Equal Opportunities (ANES), The National Institute of Statistics, collect data (that is reported to EIGE starting with 2013), that is still not centralised to provide a comprehensive picture at the national level for future better policy-making. Moreover, not all relevant authorities collect disaggregated data and they are not systematically making it available to the public. Data are available usually by request based upon Law No. 544/2001 on public access to official data.

In Romania, under the pressure of international organisations and feminist associations, after the 2000s, steps were taken to create a (fragile) legislative and institutional framework to combat domestic violence. An important moment is the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2016. The first country report of the GREVIO group on the implementation of the provisions of this convention was published in June 2022 and is extremely useful for understanding the way in which the Romanian State deals with violence against women. Overall, although it recognises the efforts made in several directions, the report also underlines many aspects that have either not been addressed at all, or have been started, but are rather at the legislative or plans and strategies level, the implementation part being precarious or non-existent. One of the chapters where Romania scores poorly is data collection: "Romania does not have an integrated data collection system on domestic violence and other forms of violence against women" (Baseline Evaluation Report Romania 2022, 23). The GREVIO report highlights the efforts of NGOs in data collection. State institutions have carried out very few national surveys related to perceptions, attitudes and experiences of violence. The National Institute of Statistics is content to take the data provided by the DGSAPCs, so it only refers to the people in the records of these institutions and who received assistance: thus, for the year 2021, only 2,953 women were victims of acts of violence. From the data collected by the Romanian Police, in 2021 33,970 women were victims of acts of violence based on notification documents. Needless to say, as it currently stands, the INS database is not only completely useless, but can also be dangerous: if a person does not carefully read the information related to the data collected/presented and does not have enough information about collecting data on violence against women, it can be concluded that this phenomenon is marginal in Romanian society. Thus, the only relevant data, from the point of view of legislation and definitions agreed at the EU level, are provided by the survey carried out by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) in 2014.

The most recent research on gender norms and stereotypes in relation to gender violence is the report *Gender Violence Barometer 2022. Violence against women in Romania: representations and perceptions*, coordinated by Ionela Băluță and Claudiu

Tufiş, and commissioned by the women’s organisation FILIA<sup>1</sup>, being “the first national survey to examine stereotypes, perceptions and attitudes related to violence against women (and not domestic violence) within the meaning of the Istanbul Convention” (2022, p.14). The study is structured in two parts. The first part proposes a brief discussion about studying violence against women and the terms it uses and then it presents some contextual data (available data, collected data, legislation, previous research) and research methodology. The second part presents the results of the national questionnaire survey used in the barometer. It interprets the collected data, trying to highlight the most important aspects related to the population's perceptions and attitudes regarding violence against women. The analysis is subsequently divided into ten sections: recognition of forms of violence, sources of information, civic involvement, perceptions towards violence, causes of violence against women, frequency of violence against women, patriarchal values, knowledge of the legal framework, reasons why women do not complain about acts of violence, and violence against women from an intersectional perspective. The database is much richer, however, and many more analyses and correlations can be made in future studies.

Other earlier researches are *GenderEd. Combating stereotypes in education and professional training*, elaborated in 2018 by Camelia Proca and Enikö Gall (from A.L.E.G. Association) and *Gender Stereotypes in advertising and mass media* from 2011 by ActiveWatch. However, none of them are taking into account an explicit perspective on men and boys as a distinct target group.

On the other hand, starting with 2015, a change of focus toward sexualities and gender identities is quite noticeable on the agendas of new civil society organisations, such as MozaiQ LGBTQ+ or EasyECO, where several initiatives involving trans men and gender equality were carried out (such as the projects Unicorns@Work or Campus Pride).<sup>2</sup> This also shows that the understanding of gender moves from a binary conceptualisation to a much more complex and nuanced perspective where gender identity, sexuality and intersectionality are the strongest pillars. In tandem with this path, one can also notice the flourishing of several feminist and queer independent publishing houses that are consistently promoting local productions from an interdisciplinary and intersectional perspective, including a focus on queer communities, trans men and non-binary identified people.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Working with men and boys in addressing gender stereotypes and harmful gender norms

Given that no concrete and structured plan of involving men and boys in gender equality policies, programmes and projects have been carried out for the last 15 years, this issue was never an explicit item on the government’s agenda. The political life is

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<sup>1</sup> Publication elaborated within the project "Knowledge is Power!" - *Research and advocacy for improvement of gender violence policy*, financed by the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mozaiqlgbt.ro/>; <https://easyeco.org/>; <https://identity.education/>.

<sup>3</sup> Publishing houses such as Hecate, FrACTalia, Free Pages and Black Button Books.

unsurprisingly dominated by gender blind or gender conservative both male and female politicians. Some male politicians made themselves visible for supporting gender equality actions explicitly and constantly in the public space. In the context of pre- and post- EU accession, Romania aligned itself more or less successfully to the European standards concerning gender equality legislation and institutions. The major areas of interventions are the labour market, gender violence, trafficking, mass-media, education and political representation, reflected in the governmental strategies, on the one hand, and in the programmes implemented by various non-governmental organisations in the field, on the other hand. “Men”, as explicit target groups, as both “objects” of critical research and in gender policies, are almost absent and their specific issues are not thematised. The only areas where they became clearly “marked” are the work-life balance discussions and the need to involve them in equal sharing of childcare and domestic work. Though debates on men and masculinities organised under the umbrella of larger topics of the gender equality agenda by various research centres, universities, NGOs and public administration, are not missing, the proposed measures are lacking. As far as the academic life is concerned, there are few researchers either working specifically on men’s issues and/or men and gender equality from various interdisciplinary stances or they are just friendly and supportive toward the movement.<sup>4</sup> At the NGOs level, there are more pro-feminist or/and gender sensitive men joining the organisations for women’s rights and gender equality, their programmes and projects (probably the best current examples are [A.L.E.G](#) from Sibiu, [FILIA](#) and [E-Romnja](#) from Bucharest, where several men are constantly and actively supporting the organisations’ initiatives. Nevertheless, overall, these NGOs don’t have any current explicit focus on involving men in gender equality, even though they do acknowledge the need of such measure.

According to the information available, there are currently no specific programmes in place for the preventive intervention and treatment of perpetrators of domestic violence. A programme for the primary prevention of domestic violence called “STOP VIOLENCE!” has been implemented within the penitentiary system since 2010. It is a social assistance programme whose beneficiaries include people convicted of crimes against family members and people deprived of liberty that manifest difficulties relating to family members following incidents of violence. The programme lasts 12 weeks and its main objectives are to provide information to the beneficiaries about different types of domestic violence, to dismantle the prejudices about domestic violence and to help the beneficiaries of the programme to acknowledge the effects of domestic violence, understand gender differences and develop relationship skills. A total of 724 perpetrators completed the programme in 2019 and 448 in 2020. Furthermore, there are no specific measures to evaluate the impact of the programmes on perpetrator behaviour and/or victim safety. In relation to programmes for sex offenders, in accordance with Law No. 118/2019, an automated national

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Grunberg, Mihaela Miroiu, Liliana Popescu, Oana Baluta, Ionela Baluta, Ovidiu Anemțoaicei, Ov. Cristian Norocel, Bogdan Popa, Alexandru Dincovici.

register for persons committing sexual crimes or exploiting persons or minors became functional in June 2021. A programme for sex offenders is implemented in the penitentiary system. After an assessment of their specific needs, sessions for groups of 4-12 participants are offered. The duration and frequency of the sessions depend on the pathology of the offenders included in the programme and the sessions focus on strengthening the capacity of self-control and empathy for the victims. In 2019, 297 offenders completed the programme and 285 did so in 2020.

## 2. Policy debate

Men and sexuality, as part of a broader political debate on family was in the spotlight in the context of revising the Constitution in 2014 with focus on the legal definition of family and marriage. Even though the Istanbul Convention entered into force in Romania in 2016, which seemed to guarantee, at least partially, a frame of reference for the legal approach to gender - in the second decade of the 21st century, several legislative initiatives directed against women and queer people have made their way through the forums, supported by an increasingly active current of conservative opinion. In 2012, PD-L senators submitted a legislative proposal for the establishment of "pregnancy crisis" counseling offices. The abortion could no longer be performed without the presentation of a certificate attesting that the pregnant woman had gone through the counseling procedure and the mandatory five-day "thinking" period. In 2013, the project was rejected by the Chamber of Deputies. In the same year, the Coalition for the Family, an association made up of several dozen religious organisations, began its actions to amend Article 48 of the Constitution, so that it clearly defines marriage as a union between "a woman and a man". In 2016, the Coalition collected almost three million signatures to amend the text of the Constitution. Nevertheless, and even if the powerful Romanian Orthodox Church itself offered its support, the referendum to amend the Constitution, organised in 2018, was not successful, the turnout being very reduced (20% participation, the minimum required being one third participation threshold).

In June 2020, amid the administrative and political confusion surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, a project to amend the education law proposed by a senator, a theologian by profession, received a favorable opinion from the Commission for Human Rights and was voted in the Senate. The amendment included, among other things, a ban on "activities to spread the theory or opinion of gender identity, understood as the theory or opinion that gender is a different concept from biological sex and that the two are not always the same." The bill passed without prior knowledge of its existence and it came as a shock in society. Immediately, all major universities in Romania came out with public statements against the bill citing it as an imposition on academic freedom. The Romanian president Iohannis contested it at the Constitutional Court, arguing that the law has a discriminatory character and that it affects the fundamental right regarding access to education. In the end the Constitutional Court deemed the bill unconstitutional in a decision in which the Court argues for the differences between biological sex and gender as a social construct, citing numerous treaties ratified by Romania, including the Istanbul Convention.



In 2022, a series of parliamentarians belonging to the ethnic Hungarian party UDMR submitted a bill to the Parliament which would ban so-called “homosexual and gender identity propaganda” in a series of instances: schools, universities, public space, Internet and mass media, detention facilities, sports. The bill was inspired by similar legislation passed in Hungary by the regime of Viktor Orbán and the main proponent of the bill in Romania, deputy Zakarias Zoltan admitting publicly he copied the legislation from the Hungarian one. The bill would change the law regarding protection of children. It has passed the Romanian Senate (silently, automatically, without a vote) and received two positive approvals in two committees in the chamber of Deputies, pending a plenary vote.

### 3. Good practice examples

The [Gender Equality Festival](#), on its 17th edition, organised by A.L.E.G association in 2022, is an awareness campaign addressed primarily to young people to help them become familiar with concepts such as human rights and women’s rights and to see beyond stereotypes and prejudices. Designed with and for young people, the festival approached themes such as refugees and migration and analysed what inequalities are deepening in the shadow of war and how we can counter them. Over the summer, A.L.E.G. team trained 20 volunteers on equal rights and non-violence. In an exchange of experience with young Ukrainians, the volunteers created a script for a play entitled “War Changes Lives”, where the audience can be involved in changing the outcome. The event was an opportunity to interact with the Ukrainian community from Sibiu and at the same time a chance to better understand the pressures under which people make decisions in crisis situations. However, despite its 17 years long-run, the project still does not address explicitly men and boys as a distinct and direct target group.

### 4. Transferability aspects

For sure, the report “Gender norms in Ireland”, published in December 2021 as the 6th report in its Statistical Spotlight series, would be a useful tool for measuring changing norms of masculinities and related policies. Even if the report lacks gender disaggregated data or data that includes ethnic identifiers in Ireland, or that can recognise the diversity of women’s and men’s experiences, still the initiative would be a strong starting point for elaborating a Romanian data strategy that can capture the processes of how gender norms are contextual and articulated intersectionally. Looking at the Austrian case, the telephone helpline for men could easily be implemented by the Romanian National Agency for Equal Opportunities (ANES). Furthermore, violence prevention workshops and individual and group counselling for boys and male youth, even from an earlier age, could be organised at the national level in schools as separate programmes or as part of certain curricula such as the already existing classes on civic education, just to name few examples. However, both initiatives would require trained staff, specific expertise and appropriate budget, as well as political will and support.



## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

There is an urgent need to encourage at the state level, the academics and civil society levels a more explicit and focused engagement with men and boys under the larger gender equality umbrella, especially in the context of the current conservative backlashes. However, it needs to be framed under a new conceptualisation of gender and gender identity so as to make sure the trans men and queer men are not excluded, given precisely the existing context where conservative forces are mixing the concepts, as part of their new strategy to undermine women's rights and gender equality as it is currently understood at EU level.

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