



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

Synergies between gender equality and climate action


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Exploring the gender dimension of emergent climate action in Romania

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Abstract

Climate action is still an emergent political issue in Romania, with important input from the EU. Good governance, inclusive for the most vulnerable, remains a precondition for its success. Mainstreaming gender when mapping out those most affected by climate hazards and those in need of support in the process of green transition offers the possibility to better target resources. It also brings the opportunity to involve and empower new community actors at the various levels of climate action.

1. The context: emergent climate action in Romania and the quest for its gender dimension

Romania is one of the most unequal countries in the EU, and gender disparities surface as a cross-cutting dimension shaping class inequality, regional differences, historical discrimination and disadvantage faced by the Roma ethnic minority, and vulnerability to environmental hazards induced by the climate crisis. The pursuit of climate goals translates into complex measures difficult to implement in a country with already worrying rates of energy poverty, weak circular economy, massively privatised housing stock (95%) and very limited public social housing, systemic underinvestment in the railway system, and a legacy of industrial brownfields, dismantled mining sector, questionable waste management etc. Climate action is still an emergent political issue, with important input from the EU. Good governance, inclusive for the most vulnerable, remains a precondition for its success.

The latest [Eurobarometer on attitudes towards climate change](#) (July 2023), revealed that only 54% of Romanian citizens rendered climate change as a very serious problem, as compared to 77% of all EU respondents. However, when asked about how much exposed they were personally to environment and climate related risks and threats, 45% of Romanians admitted facing such hazards, as compared to 37% of all EU respondents. The same survey points out that only 29% of Romanians indicated that they have taken some action to fight climate change in the last six months, as compared to 63% of all EU respondents. Nonetheless, with respect to improving the isolation of their home to reduce energy consumption, one in five Romanians answered affirmatively, i.e. slightly more than EU respondents overall (17%).

1.1 Climate action on the political agenda

These figures reflect the contradiction between the relatively marginal position of climate action on the Romanian domestic political agenda and the palpable effects of environmental hazards unleashed by climate change. The paradox could be partly explained by the perceived advantages of the country's geographical location on continental Europe, that so far safeguarded against immediate harsh consequences of climate change, partly by profound social, economic, and regional disparities within the country (Fina et al., 2021), and the uneven distribution of environmental and climate hazards, with the most vulnerable categories having the least resources to voice out their concerns and political claims.

1.2 Strategies and action plans for climate goals

In line with the United Nations 17 global sustainable development goals for 2030, Romania launched in 2018 the *National Strategy for Sustainable Development* and established a corresponding state department, under the Prime Minister. The National Agency for Equality between Women and Men (ANES) took part in writing the strategy. Its related [action plan](#) was elaborated only by 2022, and in the field of climate action it contained strong synergies with the [National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Romania](#) (NRRPR, October 2021). The planned measures regard green transition and sustainable, inclusive growth; however, none of the two objectives reflect on gender disparities, even though gender equality is the fifth sustainable development goal. The [European Commission Staff Working Document on the Analysis of the NRRPR](#) notes that gender issues were addressed in the chapters on education, employment, health, and social reforms; yet, not in the climate chapter. Tellingly, the [two-pages factsheet](#) that outlines the NRRPR does not contain the words “gender”, “inequality”, “poverty” or “vulnerable”.

The situation of those most vulnerable to the economic and social consequences of green transition is supposed to be addressed with the help of the [Social Climate Fund of the European Union](#). To this end, EU Member States should elaborate by 2025, following public consultations, their national Social Climate Plans, with 25% financing covered by Member States, and 75% by the EU. The aim is to facilitate the gradual replacement of fossil fuels with renewable green energy by offering targeted support for those who otherwise could hardly afford to pay for improving the energy efficiency of their homes or business. Social Action Plans should also include the upgrading of railways and public transport infrastructure for urban mobility.

In this respect, important preparatory work for the Social Climate Plan in the field of energy poverty and governance was performed by [Romanian Observatory on Energy Poverty](#). In their [assessment](#), half of the Romanian households have been already affected by energy poverty, and households in the middle-income range have not been safeguarded. Rural households, on average, are more affected by energy poverty (Sinea et al., 2021); however, the report does not present data on regional disparities or stratification within larger urban localities, and the gender dimension was so far missing from their analyses. The situation of spatially marginalised informal settlements, inhabited mostly by precarious segments of the Roma ethnic minority,

should receive more attention as they typically suffer from severe energy deprivation. The salience and urgency of this issue is also acknowledged by the authors (Sinea et al., 2021, pp. 50-53).

Effective governance also needs good quality data. At present, a systematic collection of data on the gender dimension of climate action is missing. While the [National Institute for Statistics](#) has already started building data on climate change and climate action, important variables such as the number of deaths and injuries attributed to natural disasters are not disaggregated by gender.

To summarise: strategies and action plans for green transition so far missed to embrace a gender perspective. Given women's overrepresentation among the economically most vulnerable categories, the future Social Climate Plan would need it to effectively achieve its envisaged objectives.

2. The gender dimension of vulnerability to climate crisis and green transition

As [measured by the European Institute for Gender Equality](#) (EIGE), Romania has the lowest gender equality index among the EU countries, with a score of 56.1 (EU-27 average at 70.2). Importantly, the largest inequalities can be depicted in the case of employment (lower rates for women, but also higher rates of women doing unpaid labour in agriculture), care responsibilities (disproportionately taken up by women), and political participation (few women in political decision-making positions). [National statistics on occupational status](#) point out that men are overrepresented among employers (80%) and self-employed (74.3%), while women among unpaid family workers (65.6%). However, wage-earning women and men have the lowest earnings disparity in the EU, with men earning only 2.8% more than women in Romania, as compared to 17.6% in the EU on average (see Gender Equality Index, 2023; author's calculations). Similarly, the monetary indicator of at-risk-of poverty (a relative measure based on national median equivalized income of households) points at a small disparity between women and men in Romania: 1.4% higher risk of poverty for women, as compared to the EU-27 average of 1.8% higher for women. Disparities surface when looking at the situation of seniors: 28.1% of women above 75 years old face monetary poverty as compared to 18.2% of men from the same age group. The corresponding EU averages are 21.8% for senior women and 14.6% for senior men. Conversely, single adults with dependent children, a situation significantly more frequent for mothers as compared to fathers, register 23.8% poverty rate in Romania, below the 31.8% EU average. Among various household types, in Romania households with two adults and three or more dependent children face among the highest rates of monetary poverty: 40.4%, as compared to 26.1% EU average. In-work poverty affects men more frequently than women: 9.7% in-work monetary poverty rate for women and 17.6% for men. The corresponding figures for the EU: 7.5% for women and 9.4% for men (Eurostat 2024, data for 2022; author's calculations).

Concerning women's participation in STEM sectors, we should note that in 2022 persons with tertiary education employed in science and technology represented 16.8% of the labour force in Romania (smaller than the 23.9% in the EU), and 55.3% of them were women (higher than the 54% in the EU). More narrowly, those employed in high-technology sectors represented 11.3% of the labour force in Romania (as compared with 10.3% in the EU), and 33% of them were women (as compared with 30% in the EU). These figures indicate that although women represent the majority of those with tertiary education employed in science and technology in Romania, they are less well represented in high technology sectors, where only one in three employees with university degree were women (Source: Eurostat 2024, author's calculations).

As compared to other EU countries, Romania has a larger share of persons employed in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries: 13.8% of employed men and 9% of employed women. Importantly, almost half (45%) of women working in the agricultural sector are unpaid family workers, meaning that they depend almost solely on the income of their families, without any insurance-based social entitlements such as maternity and child-care leave benefits, unemployment support or pensions. They represent one of the most vulnerable categories to climate change, given that Southern Romania, that has the largest agricultural sector, has been already facing desertification.

Climate change causes extreme weather conditions that disrupt public services: public transport might be blocked, schools and kindergartens closed for a couple of days, social services such as elderly care at home suspended. All these put additional burden on women, who most often undertake these care responsibilities by asking for a day-off from work or temporary telework (exhausting when having to respond simultaneously to the care needs of small children or dependent elderly). Given that extreme weather proves out to be increasingly hard to predict, the disruption and stress faced by carers is considerable. Conversely, environmental and climate hazards have severe effects on working conditions in construction and other outdoors manual jobs that disproportionately employ men, with negative consequences on their health condition.

3. Women's political participation and climate action

Women's political participation, while important in its own right, is also often regarded as instrumental for sustained climate action and ensuring a balanced and equitable share of risks and costs in the implementation of green transition, adaptation to climate change, and tackling the climate crisis.

Following the last Parliamentary election, only 19.8% of MPs in the Romanian Parliament were women, as compared to 32.7% EU average (see EIGE, data for 2021). The share of women ministers shows more fluctuation due to the frequent reorganization of governments. For example, in 2023, 6 out of 19 ministers were women.

As of February 2024, there are several ongoing initiatives to improve women's political participation. Most notably, ANES takes part as beneficiary in the project [Gender Mainstreaming in Public Policy and Budgeting](#) (2022), financed by the EC, with the country-specific objectives of building capacity for gender mainstreaming and women's economic and political empowerment. ANES issued in March 2023 its report (Băluță and Dumitru, 2023) on the analysis of gender equality policies in Romania 2016-2022, soon after the launching of the [National Strategy for Equal Chances and Equality of Treatment for Women and Men, and the Prevention and Tackling of Domestic Violence, 2022-2027](#). The *Strategy* was a condition for Romania to access EU funding. In parallel, a civil society initiative launched by Declic association gathers signatures to [petition](#) the Romanian Parliament to put on the agenda a cross-party legislative proposal of women MPs that would bind political parties to allocate at least 33% of potentially eligible positions to both women and men.

Importantly, the above-mentioned 2023 report commissioned by ANES mentions only one initiative related to the gender dimension of climate action, namely two awareness raising campaigns organized by the County Labour Office in Tulcea and Maramureș counties in collaboration with the Association for the Development of Women's Entrepreneurship and the [Sustainability Embassy in Romania](#). The report does not contain an analysis of the vulnerability of women.

4. Country-specific concerns for gender-sensitive climate action

In Romania, one can still witness forms of extreme poverty and marginalisation, particularly salient among the precarious segments of the Roma ethnic minority. Empowering women from these communities to express their needs and identify resources proved so far instrumental for the success of local desegregation and development projects. Climate action should involve them too not only as beneficiaries, but also as partners and actors in multilevel governance.

Transnational labour migration may be financially beneficial for households to improving their energy-efficiency, but it also limits their administrative capacities. These families might need more time to adjust, even if they could cope with the costs with some subsidies and micro-credits.

As compared to other EU countries, Romania has a relatively higher share of people working in agriculture, and among them the most precarious segments of the labour force: unpaid family workers (typically women) and casual workers (typically men). Environmental hazards affect both their revenues and their living conditions, making the agricultural sector one of the least desirable ones. This limits the possibilities to reduce the length of commodity chains for food and other agricultural products. Subsidizing agriculture remains crucial, and it involves a gender dimension too. Women working on farms as unpaid family members typically have low education, and vocational training might be out of their reach due to care responsibilities in the family. Conversely, men face high rates of in-work poverty, and have few resources

to invest in climate-friendly upgrading of their homes or business, and adaptation to new environmental hazards.

The largely unaddressed long term care needs of the older population put a specific burden on women, as public services remain scarce, and private services hard to afford. Moreover, almost one of three senior women above 75 face monetary poverty, and one of five men. Dependence on the help of relatives implies thus a financial dimension too.

Romania is a largely pro-European country, relying on EU funding. However, limited awareness of the gravity of climate crisis and the urgent need for climate action, in combination with the costs of green transition might fuel the popularity of EU-sceptic, conservative right-wing parties, as it happened in other member states. Their agendas typically contain measures to limit women's reproductive rights and threaten members of the LGBTQI+ communities. The politics of climate action requires a gender-sensitive approach from this point of view as well.

There is a glass-ceiling faced by women in public decision-making structures: while women and men might have a balanced representation in the working-groups and teams that they prepare reports and documents, men are overrepresented among those in power to *de facto* sign and endorse concrete policies and measures. Ensuring women's higher participation in leadership positions would benefit a more effective and inclusive climate action governance.

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