

PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER EQUALITY IN ROMANIAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS: A STUDY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: *This study investigates perceptions and social representations of gender equality in public institutions, through qualitative research. The method used was the focus group, which allowed for the highlighting of personal experiences and emotional perceptions on gender equality. The results show that equality is understood as a principle of equal rights and responsibilities but felt as an incomplete and contradictory reality. Public institutions are perceived as rigid and resistant to change and media campaigns are valued when they transmit authentic and inclusive messages. The study highlights the need for institutional reforms and cultural transformations.*

Key words: *gender equality, public institutions, gender stereotypes, marketing campaigns*

1. Introduction

Public institutions should uphold and embody the principles of inclusion and equity as cornerstones of the state's and society's operations. That said, gender differences persist in decision-making processes and administrative structures. In addition, stereotypes, institutional obstacles and conventional approaches to defining competences contribute to the perception of inequality between men and women in leadership roles (Bermúdez-Figueroa, 2021).

A common aspect is vertical segregation, which manifests itself in women not being sufficiently represented in leadership and decision-making positions in the public sector. Despite the fact that there are many women working in administration, the number of women occupying positions of power remains limited (Munuve et al., 2022). This disparity indicates that public institutions have not yet managed to maximize the benefits of gender diversity.

In addition to the obstacles that hinder access to positions, there are also subtle differences in the way performance and professional merit are assessed. A traditional organizational culture often favours behaviours and characteristics associated with male

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leadership in institutional standards and practices (Bermúdez-Figueroa and Roca, 2022). In this context, women working in public institutions face more difficulties in demonstrating their skills and improving their decision-making positions.

These realities show that, although gender equality is enshrined as a principle in the normative plan, its concrete application in public institutions remains fragmented and often contradictory. The persistence of structural barriers and gender-differentiated assessments suggests that the problem is not only about formal access to positions, but also about the way cultural norms and organizational practices are configured. Therefore, a careful exploration of how these dynamics are perceived and experienced by individuals, as well as how institutions and public discourses can support or limit change, becomes necessary.

In this context, the present research aims to bring an in-depth perspective on how gender equality is understood and experienced within public institutions. Unlike statistical analyses or assessments based exclusively on quantitative indicators, a qualitative approach allows capturing the nuances, tensions and experiences associated with everyday interactions. Thus, the study contributes to understanding the mechanisms through which stereotypes and institutional practices influence access to equity but also to identifying possible directions for change.

2. Literature Review

In today's society, gender stereotypes greatly influence the way women and men perceive the professional environment and social life. These generalized beliefs, often internalized and unconsciously applied, determine different expectations regarding the behaviours and roles of the two gender categories. The existing literature highlights the fact that women are frequently associated with sensitivity, emotionality and the spirit of cooperation, while men are perceived as independent, strong and control-oriented (Tremmel, Wahl, 2023). These representations are visible in organizations through the definition and evaluation of managerial skills. Women are often seen as more suitable for roles such as caring, communication or team coordination, but when viewed through the eyes of men, their qualities are often undervalued or even considered inferior (Manzi et al., 2024). Consequently, there are two types of gender segregation: horizontal, which involves the division of women into different fields, and vertical, which involves an underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Rebelo et al., 2024).

Over time, social organizations and institutions have begun to play a very important role in transmitting and reinforcing gender stereotypes. The family, school, media and public or private institutions have begun to contribute, either consciously or unconsciously, to a reproduction of more traditional models that usually define what is "appropriate" for women and men (Tabassum, Nayac, 2021). In this case, men are associated with professions in industry or technology, while areas such as social services, education or health are considered "feminine" (González et al., 2019). This stereotypical distribution has a significant impact on the labour market and career opportunities for both genders (Son Hing et al., 2023).

Companies, government agencies and public administrations reflect and amplify these differences through their hiring, promotion and evaluation methods. For example, women are less likely to be promoted to higher levels, even if they have similar qualifications and performance to men (Rouhanizadeh, Kermanshachi, 2021). Furthermore, when values considered “masculine,” such as rationality, competition and control, are dominant in organizational cultures, they tend to undervalue skills that are associated with feminine stereotypes, such as empathy and collaboration (Alonso Gallo, Gutiérrez López, 2023).

However, more and more organizations are starting to do things to reduce these disparities. Institutional mechanisms for gender equality at European level support the adoption of transformative policies and gender mainstreaming (EIGE, 2025). To compensate for instinctive biases, companies and universities use gender equality plans, mentoring programs or “blind” hiring methods (without gender identifiers) (Isaac et al., 2009).

In many organizations, women aspiring to leadership positions face an implicit reluctance to hire them. This is due to the fear that if they exceed organizational standards of femininity, they might be considered “inadequate”. Women who adopt a more authoritarian or assertive leadership style may be seen as tougher than men in the same positions. This could lead to their perception as “too tough,” meaning they do not meet gender expectations (González et al., 2019). This double measure limits the space for women to express themselves and reinforces the belief that men do not have legitimate authority. The expectation that women share their professional responsibilities with domestic and family responsibilities is another important aspect. Studies show that additional work causes burnout, reduces availability for strategic projects or overtime, and limits opportunities for advancement (Sahni et al., 2025). In addition, well-being, motivation, and emotional balance can be affected by the pressure to work efficiently on multiple fronts.

Another element frequently discussed in the specialized literature is the phenomenon of the “glass ceiling”, which designates invisible barriers that prevent women from accessing leadership positions, despite their skills and performance (Babic, Hansez, 2021). These obstacles are not formalized in explicit regulations, but manifest themselves through informal networks of influence, lack of access to mentoring, subjective evaluative practices and stereotypes that associate leadership with perceived masculine traits. At the same time, the concept of “glass walls” highlights the tendency for women to be channelled into support or administrative positions, with reduced access to strategic roles (Zenebe et al., 2025).

Contemporary literature emphasizes the role of organizational culture and institutional socialization processes in perpetuating gender inequalities. Even when formal equality policies are in place, tacit norms and daily practices can reproduce discriminatory behaviours, from subtle exclusion from decision-making discussions to limiting access to high-visibility projects (AlEahmad, Lupu, 2025). In the same vein, organizational culture plays a central role in maintaining wage discrepancies, by valuing skills traditionally associated with masculinity and undervaluing skills considered “feminine”. Also, differential perceptions of organizational equity and inclusion show

that women experience a greater lack of psychological safety, which affects involvement and the strengthening of affective commitment to the organization (Pinho & Colston, 2024). Finally, the existing literature shows that gender differences are the result of organizational and social structures influenced by stereotypes, rather than individual traits. This demonstrates that reducing inequalities requires clear cultural and institutional changes.

3. Material and Methods

This study is based on qualitative research and its role was to capture in depth the perceptions, attitudes and representations related to gender equality in public institutions. The research method used was the focus group, due to its potential to facilitate interaction and exchange of ideas between participants, while also allowing the investigation of subtle dimensions that are difficult to capture through quantitative instruments. The choice of this research method is justified by its ability to stimulate collective reflection and generate multiple perspectives on a complex phenomenon.

The purpose of the research is to examine perceptions and experiences related to gender equality, both in everyday and institutional life and in relation to the messages transmitted through media campaigns, in order to understand the factors that shape and maintain these social representations.

In order to achieve the proposed goal, the research pursued the following objectives:

O1 - Identifying social representations of gender equality and the associated affective climate.

O2 - Identifying manifestations of gender inequality in public institutions and maintenance mechanisms

O3 - Analysing the way in which public institutions are perceived and the factors that generate resistance to change.

O4 - Analysing the impact of marketing campaigns and communication initiatives in the process of changing social representations related to gender.

The research tool used was the interview guide, built to pursue the proposed objectives and facilitate the exploration of the participants' experiences. Structured around several activities, it allowed for the generation of interactive discussions and provided the framework for the free expression of opinions. Through this approach, relevant qualitative data were obtained for understanding representations of gender equality.

Participants were selected through social networks, using a recruitment questionnaire. This included criteria such as not having participated in other qualitative focus group research in the last six months and familiarity with the topic of gender equality. In this way, the relevance and diversity of the experiences brought to the discussion were ensured.

The investigated sample was made up of nine people, eight of whom were female and one was male. The age range of the participants was between 18 and 23 years, which indicates a young category of respondents, at the beginning of their professional career. The fields of activity in which they are involved are circumscribed to the area of market

research and marketing. It is also worth noting that all participants come from urban areas, an aspect that may influence both their professional perspective and social experiences relevant to the research objectives.

4. Results and Discussion

To provide a coherent picture of the data obtained, the results are presented according to the research objectives. This approach makes it easier to follow each theme and helps to outline an overall perspective on the experiences shared by the participants.

O1- Identifying social representations of gender equality and the associated affective climate.

Participants express their vision of gender equality primarily through a normative perspective, in which the emphasis is on guaranteeing the same rights for all, on the absence of discrimination and on the equitable distribution of responsibilities between women and men. However, even if this declarative framework is solid, most recognize the incomplete and often abstract nature of equality in practice. The basic idea that constantly returns is that people should be treated first and foremost as individuals, before being placed in gender categories, which betrays an effort to break away from stereotypes. At the same time, there is an insistence on equal access to fundamental resources, such as education, health and the labour market, areas perceived as still marked by persistent imbalances.

On an affective level, the discourse is built on a fragile balance between hope and disappointment. Hope is visible in the belief that things are improving, albeit slowly, and in the desire to see clearer changes in the near future. In counterpoint, frustration and sadness are manifested in the realization that double standards continue to operate in everyday life — gestures and behaviours accepted for men are often sanctioned or ridiculed when they belong to women. This emotional ambivalence speaks to a distance between what participants' value as a principle and what they actually experience in their interactions with institutions and society at large.

The word association technique illustrates this complexity even more clearly. For example, the term "power" is understood both as a negative resource, associated with abuse and authoritarian control, and as an inner strength, linked to emotional balance and the ability to self-manage. Similarly, "equal opportunities" are not described as a reality already achieved, but rather as a desirable projection, a destination point that society has not yet reached.

Thus, representations of gender equality configure a dual picture: on the one hand, there is a normative modernity that values equality as a fundamental principle, and on the other hand, this modernity coexists with traditionalizing everyday practices that perpetuate differences in treatment and confirm stereotypes. The tension between these two planes explains the emotional intensity and the oscillating tone of the interventions, which alternate between optimism, indignation and scepticism. Moreover, it indicates that gender equality is experienced not only as a problem of

policies and institutions, but also as a dimension of affective life and interpersonal relationships, which makes change perceived as both a collective necessity and an individual struggle.

O2 – Identifying manifestations of gender inequality in public institutions and maintenance mechanisms.

The empirical accounts provided by the participants allow the determination of recurring patterns of inequality experienced or observed in public institutions. In the health sector, several interventions illustrated how patients' symptoms are minimized or attributed to supposed "gender-specific" characteristics, which led to delays in diagnosis and the need to consult multiple medical opinions. This invalidation mechanism is based on medicalized prejudices and reproduces inequality through the lack of recognition of women's subjective experience.

In the university educational environment, participants reported situations in which male and female professors explicitly favoured male students, placing female students in a position of inferiority. This devaluation of female academic performance has direct effects on motivation and self-confidence. In the professional environment, a pattern of marginalization of ideas formulated by women emerged, in contrast to the valorisation of men's opinions, even when they were unfounded. Thus, managerial decisions, taken predominantly by male leaders, confirm a circular system of perpetuating inequality.

The determination of these mechanisms highlights three major factors: explicit double standards (the same behaviours being appreciated differently according to gender), implicit biases in performance evaluation, and organizational inertia associated with a traditionalist institutional culture. Overall, public institutions appear as spaces with high resistance to change, and their transformation is perceived as possible only through structural pressure (legislation on salary transparency) and by cultivating more empathetic relational practices in everyday interactions.

O3 – Analysing how public institutions are perceived and the factors that generate resistance to change.

Through their descriptions, the participants have outlined a fairly uniform image of public institutions, and these representations allow us to glimpse how state structures are perceived. In most cases, institutions are associated with aging figures, with people aged between 50 and 70, characterized by rigidity, arrogance or boredom, all traits that suggest an "outdated" mentality and a distant attitude. Even when they are attributed feminine traits, the image remains predominantly negative, indicating that it is not gender that defines the perception, but rather "cultural aging" and the difficulty of adapting to societal changes. Only sporadically do more optimistic descriptions appear, in which institutions are projected as younger, communicative and open to equality, but these are perceived more as exceptions or idealized projections than as reflections of reality.

This collective image points to a dominant perception of public institutions as bureaucratic systems with high inertia, where change is held back by traditionalist mentalities and a lack of real interest in issues such as gender equality. Participants also

made a clear distinction between older generations of employees, described as being reluctant to change, and younger generations, who aspire to modernization and openness. Resistance to change is often explained by an intergenerational logic – “if we managed it, so can you” – which accentuates the disconnect between citizens and the institutions they interact with.

Through this lens, public institutions are seen as actors of the perpetuation of social inequality, particularly gender inequality, rather than merely as ineffective administrative frameworks. This impression strengthens mistrust and raises doubts about the viability of real reforms. Put another way, institutions are not only figuratively “aged,” but they are also unable to adapt to new social needs, making reform seem like a difficult and unlikely process.

O4 -Analysis of the impact of marketing campaigns and communication initiatives in the process of changing social representations related to gender.

The analysis of the campaigns discussed in the focus group with the participants (“HeForShe”, “Like a Girl”, “She Can STEM”, “Unstereotype Alliance”, “She Creates Change”) shows that the participants evaluated them both in terms of their emotional charge and their visibility in the public space. “Like a Girl” was perceived as having the strongest impact, due to its constant presence in traditional and digital media, but also through the simplicity and clarity of the message transmitted. “HeForShe” attracted attention by explicitly involving men as partners in the fight for equality, an element that generated an effect of contrast and surprise. In contrast, “She Can STEM” and “She Creates Change” were appreciated for their ability to encourage women to enter male-dominated fields or for the way they brought attention to the experiences of women from more conservative cultural contexts, thus offering a broader perspective on the diversity of gender-related situations. Regarding the “Unstereotype Alliance” campaign, it was mentioned for its emphasis on the early formation of egalitarian attitudes, by promoting behavioural models that avoid the reproduction of traditional gender stereotypes, being considered by participants especially relevant in relation to the socialization of children.

Beyond the appreciations, the participants also pointed out a series of shortcomings. These include the insufficient representation of traditional preferences when they are voluntarily assumed, the absence of clear messages that would also encourage men to explore careers considered “feminine”, as well as a lack of promotion of masculine emotional expression. In this sense, the creative proposals generated within the groups functioned as a complement, coming up with solutions such as the slogans “Shared household, shared responsibilities” or “Together we succeed”. These express a collaborative vision, based on the idea of complementarity and co-responsibility between women and men. Also, the choice of broadcasting channels (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube) and short formats such as reels or shorts show a clear desire to anchor the message in the digital universe of the younger generation.

From an impact perspective, it becomes clear that, in order to contribute to the reshaping of gender norms, campaigns must simultaneously achieve three dimensions: identity relevance (the audience must find themselves in the message), narrative

contrast (to provoke through unexpected scenarios) and institutional credibility (the external message must be supported by real changes within institutions). The lack of this coherence risks transforming campaigns into mere exercises in the imagination, perceived as superficial or even manipulative. In conclusion, the evaluation suggests that truly effective communication strategies are those that manage to be collaborative, authentic and visible on multiple platforms, in order to diminish cultural resistance and accelerate the process of normalizing gender equality in the public space.

5. Conclusion

The research results show that gender equality is predominantly conceptualized as a normative principle, associated with equal rights and responsibilities, but also perceived as an incomplete and often contradictory reality. Participants highlighted a constant tension between declared ideals and lived experiences, which generates an emotional climate oscillating between hope and frustration. This gap emphasizes the fact that equality cannot be understood only through the lens of legal norms but must also be analysed as a subjective experience, deeply marked by everyday interactions.

At the institutional level, the data confirm the persistence of subtle and explicit mechanisms that maintain inequality. Women face double standards, evaluation biases, and a traditionalist organizational culture that reproduces gender hierarchies and limits access to decision-making positions. Public institutions are perceived as aging, rigid and resistant to change, which fuels scepticism and erodes citizens' trust. The distinction made by participants between older generations, associated with resistance, and younger generations, more open to transformation, suggests the existence of an intergenerational fracture that influences the dynamics of change.

An important aspect captured in the analysis is the role of marketing campaigns and communication initiatives in reshaping gender norms. Campaigns such as "Like a Girl" or "HeForShe" were perceived as influential due to their visibility and strong messages, but participants also reported significant shortcomings: the underrepresentation of traditionally assumed preferences, the absence of messages dedicated to men and the insufficient promotion of masculine emotional expression. The proposals formulated within the focus group highlight the preference for collaborative communication, with simple and inclusive messages, distributed through digital channels accessible to young people.

The study also highlights the fact that gender equality is perceived not only as a matter of public policies or awareness campaigns, but as an integrated dimension of interpersonal relationships and everyday life. In this regard, the experiences of young participants show that progress depends on both structural and institutional measures, as well as cultural and attitudinal transformations.

Ultimately, achieving gender equality requires a two-pronged approach: on the one hand, clear institutional reforms that eliminate bias and ensure transparency and fairness, and on the other, authentic and relevant communication campaigns that can stimulate change in mindsets. The voice of young people is central to this process, indicating that the next generation of professionals has the potential to challenge the

status quo and promote a more inclusive and equitable organizational culture.

The results of this study are useful for decision-makers in public institutions, who can more clearly identify the mechanisms through which inequalities are perpetuated and formulate more effective policies to reduce them. They also provide valuable support to non-governmental organizations and civil society actors involved in promoting gender equality, by highlighting the perceptions and experiences of young people. Last but not least, the conclusions may be relevant for the academic environment, providing a basis for further research and for the development of educational programs aimed at supporting a more inclusive organizational culture.

Although the study makes a valuable contribution to understanding perceptions of gender equality, there are some limitations that must be taken into account. Being a qualitative research study, the results obtained cannot be extrapolated to the entire population, but only reflect the experiences and perceptions of the analysed group. The small size of the sample and its focus on a narrow age category (18–23 years) limit the possibility of generalizing the conclusions. Also, the exclusively urban origin of the participants may influence the way they report on the topic, not capturing the differences between urban and rural environments. In addition, the focus group method, although valuable for exploring social representations in depth, may be influenced by the dynamics of the discussion and the participants' tendency to adjust their answers according to the context.

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