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TRADITIO ET EXCELLENTIA

Status of **gender equality** implementation in the North-West Region

*Regional analysis,
in a national and
European context*

2025

The regional analysis was carried out by the Faculty of Geography (Babeş-Bolyai University), in partnership with the North-West Regional Development Agency, within the Interreg Europe *DEBUTING* project.

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List of abbreviations

ANES - National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men

GRB - Gender Responsive Budgeting

CE - Council of Europe

DE - European Directive

DEBUTING - Developing Business Through Inclusiveness and Gender Awareness - New Cluster Competences (Interreg Project)

EC - European Commission

EU - European Union

EIGE - European Institute for Gender Equality

GEI - Gender Equality Index

INCSMPS - National Institute for Scientific Research on Labor and Social Protection

MO – Official Monitor

NSI - National Statistical Institute

NUTS-2 - Core regions (for regional policies) - according to EUROSTAT Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics

RDA - Regional Development Agency

RDP NW - North-West Regional Development Plan

RP NW - North-West Regional Program

PIGEM - Perception Index of Gender Equity in Managerial Positions

RIS3 - Smart Specialization Strategy

SDGs - Sustainable Development Goals

SGG - General Secretariat of the Government

SMEs - Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Introduction

Gender equality is a fundamental principle of modern democracies and an essential objective for equitable and sustainable development. In recent years, this concept has gained increasing importance both internationally and in the European Union, being integrated into economic and social development strategies. In Romania, the issue of gender equality is closely linked to legislative developments, public policies and regional initiatives aimed at reducing the gaps between women and men in various areas, from access to education and the labour market to participation in decision-making processes.

At the European level, institutions such as the European Commission and the European Institute for Gender Equality constantly monitor the progress of Member States in this area, using tools such as the Gender Equality Index. These analyses show that, despite the progress made in recent years, Romania is still among the countries with the highest gender disparities in the European Union.

At national level, studies conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and various non-governmental organizations underline the significant gaps between men and women in terms of access to economic resources, participation in the labour market and representation in decision-making structures. Another important aspect analysed in the literature is the impact of cultural factors on gender equality. Traditional mentalities and gender stereotypes influence perceptions of the role of women in society, leading to their under-representation in certain professional fields and an unequal division of domestic responsibilities. In this context, it is essential to analyse not only the existing legislative framework and policies, but also the social and cultural factors influencing gender equality in local and regional contexts.

The North-West Development Region is a relevant example of how gender equality can influence regional development. Although this region is among the most economically dynamic in the country, with a diversified industry and an employment rate above the national average, there are still significant challenges in terms of gender equality. Women in the region face difficulties in accessing well-paid jobs (particularly in rural areas), in promotion to management positions and in balancing work and family responsibilities.

Gender discrimination in both the professional and social spheres persists in various forms: the gender pay gap, unequal career advancement opportunities and an under-representation of women in management positions. These issues are influenced by economic, cultural and legislative factors, and tackling them requires an integrated approach, including effective legislative measures, informed public policies and changes in socio-cultural norms.

This analysis aims to analyse how gender equality is implemented in the North-West Region, identifying existing strengths and challenges. The main objective of the analysis is to *formulate recommendations and measures for gender mainstreaming in regional development plans and strategies*. To achieve this objective, a number of secondary objectives were pursued:

1. *Assessment of the legislative framework and public policies* aimed at gender equality at regional and national level.
2. *Identify projects, strategies and funding programs* that support the advancement of gender equality in the North-West Region.
3. *Inventory of good practices in the region* that can represent an opportunity in the sustainable integration of gender equality principles within the region.

Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of gender equality in the region and to provide viable solutions for reducing inequalities. The analysis is organized into four main chapters, each addressing a key aspect of gender equality in the North-West Region. **The first chapter** provides an overview of how gender equality is addressed and implemented at European, national and regional level. The evolution of the national legislative framework is inventoried in the **second chapter**, selecting and analysing the current legal provisions aimed at the principles of gender equality, combating discrimination and promoting social equity. **Chapter three** presents a detailed analysis of public policies and funding programs aimed at promoting gender equality in the region. The set of proposed measures for better gender mainstreaming at regional level is included in **chapter four**, with recommendations for improving strategic documents and combating identified gender inequalities.

The study provides a comprehensive analysis of gender equality in the North-West Region and proposes solutions to improve existing policies, with the ultimate goal of creating a more equitable and inclusive environment for all citizens. *The Northwest Development Agency*, as a partner in the Interreg Europe *DEBUTING* project, in collaboration with the *Faculty of Geography* of the *Babeş-Bolyai University*, benefits from the good practice models presented by the project partners. Thus, they are integrated in the present analysis and constitute a solid basis for the future development of planning documents and regional strategies in an equitable, sustainable and competitive manner.

Executive summary

Gender equality is a fundamental objective at European and national level with a direct impact on economic and social development. The Regional Analysis on the Status of Gender Equality Implementation in the North-West Region investigates the state of implementation of gender equality policies in the North-West Region of Romania, with the aim of identifying the progress made, the existing challenges and solutions for improvement. The study was carried out by the *Faculty of Geography* (Babeş-Bolyai University) in partnership with the *North-West Regional Development Agency*, within the framework of the Interreg Europe *DEBUTING* project, dedicated to promoting gender equality in small and medium-sized enterprises through clusters.

The North-West region is characterized by a higher level of economic development than other regions in Romania, with a diversified industrial sector and a dynamic entrepreneurial environment. However, gender inequalities persist, as reflected in the gender pay gap, women's limited access to managerial positions and difficulties in balancing work and private life. This analysis provides a clear picture of these issues, highlights existing initiatives and proposes measures to help reduce gender gaps in the region.

1. Legislative framework and public policies on gender equality

Romania has gradually aligned itself with European Union standards on gender equality, adopting a series of laws and policies aimed at eliminating discrimination and promoting equal opportunities for women and men. However, their implementation is often weak and their impact limited by the lack of effective enforcement and monitoring mechanisms.

Among the issues analysed in the paper are:

- ***Gender-responsive budgeting***, an essential tool for the equitable distribution of public resources, is mentioned in the legislation, but its implementation remains fragmented and superficial.
- ***Gender discrimination and equal opportunities*** are covered by specific laws, but many women continue to face difficulties in accessing the job market and career advancement opportunities.
- ***Gender-based violence and sexual harassment*** are major problems and protection measures for victims are insufficiently implemented at local level.
- ***Pay equality and access to leadership positions*** remain significant challenges.

Although equal rights for women and men are enshrined in law, in reality, pay gaps and the under-representation of women in leadership positions persist.

2. Status of gender equality in the North-West Region

The analysis shows that despite the higher level of economic development of the North-West Region, significant inequalities persist between women and men:

- ***Women's participation in the labour market*** - The North-West region has an employment rate for women above the national average, but women are still under-represented in higher-paid sectors such as IT and industry.
- ***The pay gap*** - Women earn, on average, 12-15% less than men, even if they work in the same or similar jobs. This gap is more pronounced in the private sector.
- ***Access to management positions*** - Only 22% of management positions in public administration and the private sector are held by women, compared to 30% in Bucharest-Ilfov and 25% in the West Region. This under-representation is caused by both persistent gender stereotypes and the lack of programs to mentor and promote women in decision-making positions.
- ***Work-life balance*** - The infrastructure of care services for children and dependent persons is underdeveloped, particularly in rural areas. This directly affects women's participation in the labour market and their opportunities for career advancement.
- ***Entrepreneurial environment and access to finance*** - Women entrepreneurs face difficulties in accessing finance and support programs, which limits the development of women-owned businesses in the region.

3. Programs and initiatives to support gender equality

A number of initiatives (projects, programs) aimed at reducing gender inequality are listed, including:

- ***The Women Entrepreneur Program***, which provides financial support and mentoring for women who want to start and grow businesses.
- ***North-West Regional Program 2021-2027***, which has an inclusive approach on women's access to economic opportunities.
- ***EEA and Norwegian grants***, which have funded several projects in the region to combat gender-based violence and support women's economic inclusion.

Although these programs have a positive impact, access remains limited due to lack of information, bureaucracy and cultural barriers.

4. Recommendations and directions for action

To better integrate gender equality in the socio-economic environment of the North-West Region, the report proposes a series of concrete measures:

- ***Improve legislation and monitoring mechanisms*** - Introduce stronger regulations to ensure equal pay and fair access to economic opportunities.
- ***Support female entrepreneurship*** - Increase the number of funding programs for women entrepreneurs and simplify access to them.
- ***Develop work-life balance infrastructure*** - Expand childcare services and implement and promote flexible working policies.
- ***Increase women's representation in leadership positions*** - Launch mentoring and professional development programs to promote women in decision-making positions.
- ***Awareness Raising and Education*** - Implement educational campaigns to combat gender stereotypes and promote an inclusive organizational culture.

The analysis highlights that, although progress has been made in the implementation of gender equality policies in the North-West Region, many challenges persist which require integrated and sustainable solutions. Reducing gender gaps is not only a social necessity, but also an essential factor for increasing economic competitiveness and sustainable development of the region. Implementing effective measures in this area could significantly contribute to a more equitable, inclusive and competitive economic and social environment.

DEBUTING project



Developing Business Through Inclusiveness and Gender Awareness - New Cluster Competences (DEBUTING) is an interregional cooperation project funded by the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027, bringing together 12 partners from 11 regions¹, with the mission to promote gender equality as a competitiveness factor for SMEs through cluster organizations. Within the project, the partner regions benefit from a transfer of experience and good practices on gender mainstreaming approaches, and the accumulated information will be transferred to the socio-economic environment through collaboration with cluster entities in the region, recognized as agents of change, being key actors in processes of updating and implementing Smart Specialization Strategies.

From a legislative and public policy perspective, SMEs require the development of a regional and national framework to encourage and support competitiveness, inclusiveness and innovation in the business environment. These aspects are integrated in an intersectional way by the principles of *gender equality*, which, properly adopted and implemented in the business environment, have direct benefits on the level of economic profitability, the degree of innovation and creativity, the rate of attraction and retention of employees (Christiansen et al., 2016), as well as on sustainable entrepreneurial development in line with the SDGs included in the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).²

The effects of the DEBUTING project will be seen in the improvement of public policy instruments on gender equality with the aim of increasing the competitiveness of SMEs through clusters by 10% by 2026. The project also aims to raise awareness of the benefits of implementing gender equality and a diverse and inclusive environment in the entrepreneurial sphere.

The North-West Regional Development Agency, together with the Regional Representatives Committee³, an informal collaborative structure, is implementing this project at regional level, based on an open institutional collaboration with local and national public authorities, clusters and business support structures, as well as women entrepreneurship associations/NGOs. Inter-regional events, exchanges of good practices and workshops to raise awareness of the importance of gender equality will generate *assessment tools and public policy recommendations based on inclusion and equal opportunities*.

¹ Project Debuting: <https://www.interregeurope.eu/debuting>

² The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

³ RDA NW: <https://www.nord-vest.ro/en/debuting-dezvoltarea-afacerilor-prin-incluziune-si-constientizare-de-gen/>

1. European, national and regional context of gender equality

1.1. Gender equality in the context of the European Union

Being included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as in the [European Commission's Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#)⁴, gender equality is a continuous concern within the European Union. Moreover, the European [Institute for Gender Equality](#) (EIGE) is active in the European area and provides annual updates (statistical and spatial) on progress towards reducing discrimination and achieving gender parity on several levels within European countries.

The justification of the European Commission (EC, 2020) for the development of a gender equality strategy stems from the persistence of gender stereotypes in the European space, as well as from an economic market that disadvantages the female population in terms of labour market retention, career advancement and equal opportunities in the context of maintaining a work-life balance (Fig. 1).

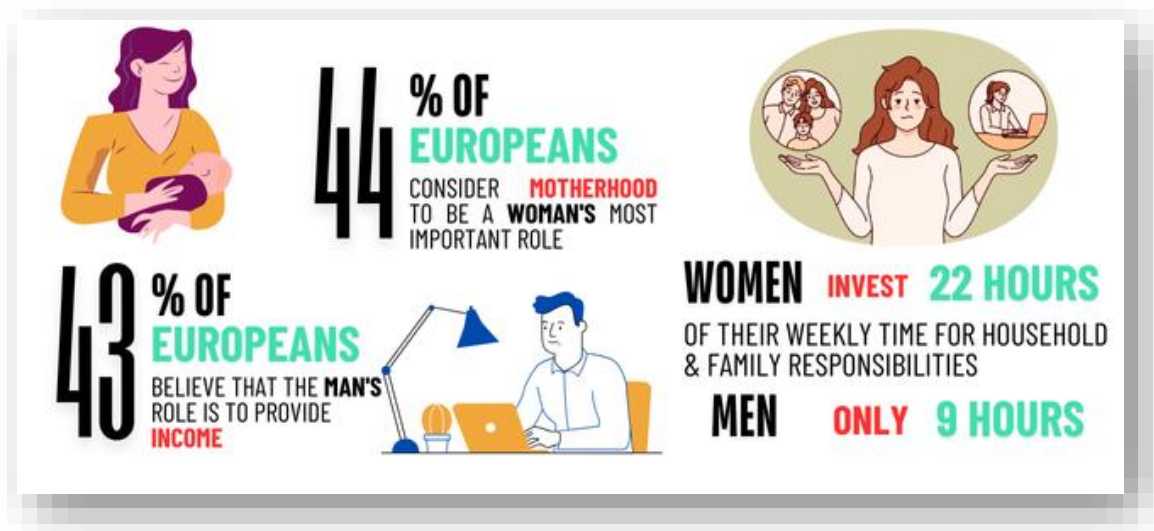


Figure 1. Work-life balance statistics at European level (based on EC data, 2020)

On the other hand, the EIGE has developed [the Gender Equality Index \(GEI\)](#)⁵ which monitors the evolution of gender equality in the European area (EIGE, 2023) both at the level of the member countries and at the level of the European Union as a whole. The GEI has recorded a significant increase at the general level over the last decade (+7.1), while the evolution by sub-domains highlights a number of specific particularities.

⁴ Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025: <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/items/682425/en>

⁵ Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2013>

Thus, *health* is the best-ranked sub-domain (Fig. 2) at European level (88.5), but it is also the one that has made the least progress. At the opposite pole is the *decision-making power* factor which, despite having the lowest score in the index, has increased by more than 17 points over the last decade. However, along with *knowledge* and *time*, it remains the sub-area where the least progress has been made on gender parity at EU level.

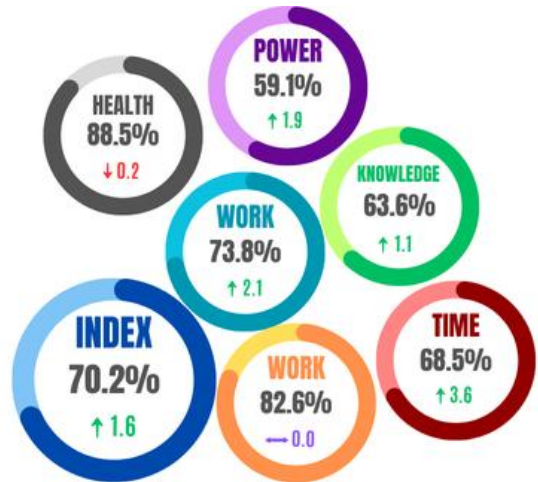


Figure 2. GEI values at 2023 in the EU (based on EIGE, 2023.)

In terms of *labour market participation*, despite the significant progress achieved in female labour market participation rates (EIGE, 2022), occupational segregation (vertical or horizontal) based on gender remains a challenge in the European area (Fig. 3). Beyond the masculinization of some fields and the feminization of others (horizontal occupational segregation), domestic and family responsibilities continue to affect women's career paths, quality of work and career advancement opportunities (vertical occupational segregation) (EIGE, 2023).

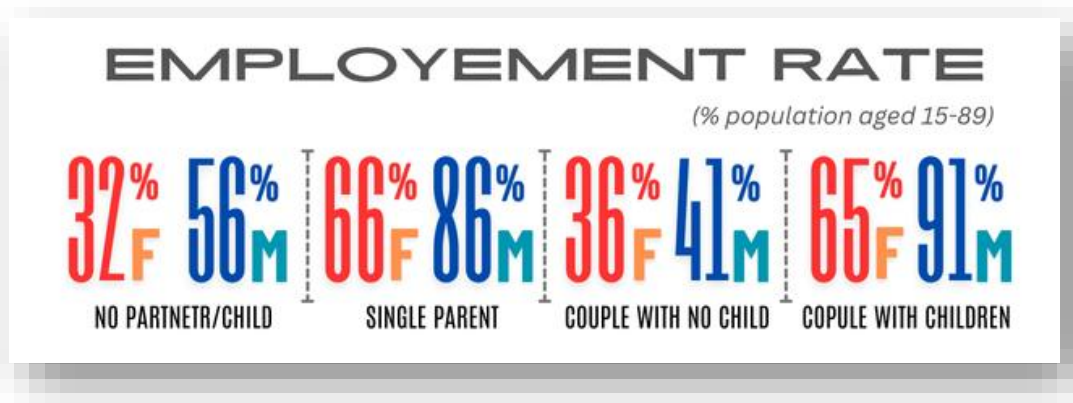


Figure 3.

Employability rate measured by EIGE (2023) and differentiated by marital status/number of children (based on EIGE data, 2023)

The difficulty with which these obstacles are overcome motivates the European Commission to develop research projects centred on highlighting inter-regional differences in gender equality, existing barriers and the specific socio-cultural and political context of each country (or region) in the EU. The Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policies has developed a tool to monitor gender equality⁶ at the regional level by *measuring the advantages and disadvantages* that the female population faces in the European area (Norlén et al., 2021). The

⁶ Female Achievement Index & Female Disadvantage Index: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/stories/s/Mapping-the-glass-ceiling-in-the-EU/vtrw-h5vm/>

results of the two indexes used highlight well-established aspects in the literature centred on gender equality: the more economically developed a region is and the higher the quality of local governance, the less disadvantaged the female population is and the greater the opportunities for socio-professional⁷ development.

Although the EU average on gender equality (regardless of the measurement tool used) is encouraging, there are major discrepancies between Member States. At national level, the gaps between countries with a high level of gender equality and those facing major difficulties in combating discrimination divide the European space into two (sometimes three) opposing socio-cultural spaces: the Western and Northern countries/regions, with a very high level of socio-economic development, are in contrast to the Central-Eastern spaces where the challenges in achieving gender parity on different levels are much more pronounced.

1.2. Gender equality in the national and regional context

As a member of the European Union, Romania is included in all instruments measuring progress towards gender equality. The geo-political and socio-cultural context in which it is situated marks a series of (trans-generational) challenges which are reflected in official statistics.

In the GEI ranking (EIGE, 2023), Romania remains in last place in terms of reducing gender discrimination (Fig. 4), registering the lowest score in Europe. Among the parameters contributing to this position in the ranking, the most determining factors are *decision-making power, knowledge and participation in the labour market*, namely those elements that are determining factors in maintaining the gender gaps in the professional environment.

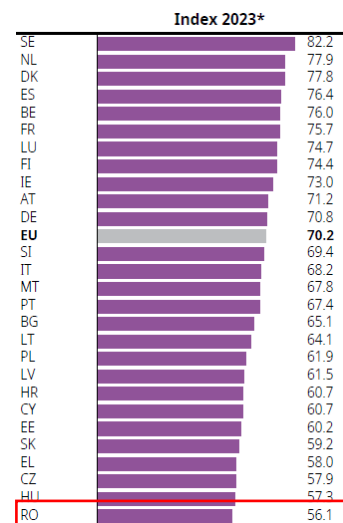
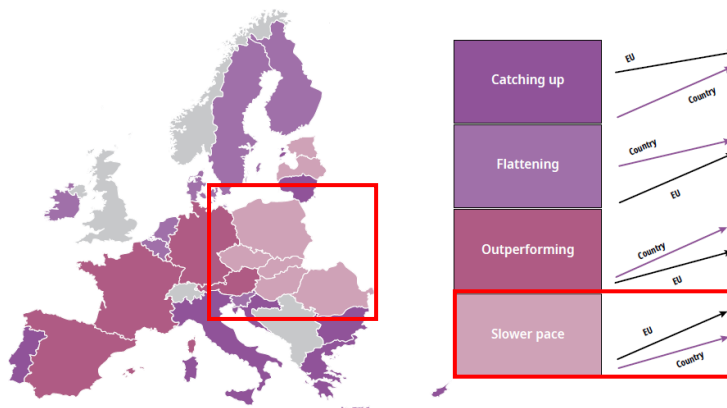


Figure 4. EU GHG ranking 2023 and spatial distribution of results (extracted from EGEI, 2023)



In other words, the development of knowledge, power of influence and professional growth are the aspects most affected by the lack of gender equality in Romania, with negative consequences on economic development (Bîrsănuț & Man, 2023), as well as on the quality of life and on maintaining the balance between domestic responsibilities and professional growth opportunities (Bîrsănuț, 2024).

⁷ Disadvantages and advantages refer to 33 indicators, including *work and remuneration, knowledge, time, time, power, health, safety, security, quality of life, etc.* The full list of parameters analyzed can be found on the project website: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/stories/s/Mapping-the-glass-ceiling-in-the-EU/vtrw-h5vm/>

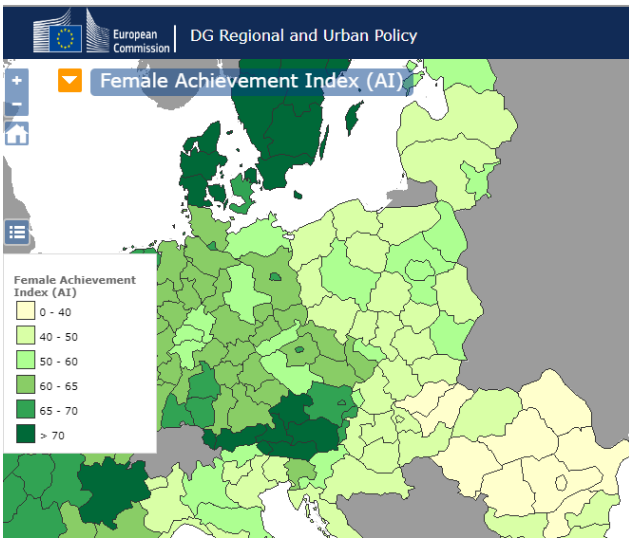


Figure 5. Spatial distribution of Female Achievement Index 2021 values at NUTS-2 levels (from Norlén et al., 2021)

The level of advantage/disadvantage of the female population as measured by Norlén et al. (2021) highlights two spatial patterns in Romania: (1) while the level of disadvantage marks all regions of Romania as being at the bottom of the ranking, (2) the level of advantage of the female population is differentially distinguished in the North-West Development Region compared to the rest of the Romanian space (Fig. 5)⁸. Beyond this regional exception, Romania as a whole presents itself as an area characterized by high levels of disadvantage, coupled with low levels of advantages available to the female population in the regional and European context.

Moreover, the employability rate at national level shows a number of gender gaps, both internal and compared to the rest of the European area (Eurostat, 2024), with one of the lowest values of the percentage of the employability rate for the female population aged 16-64 years old caring for 3 or more children (Fig. 6).

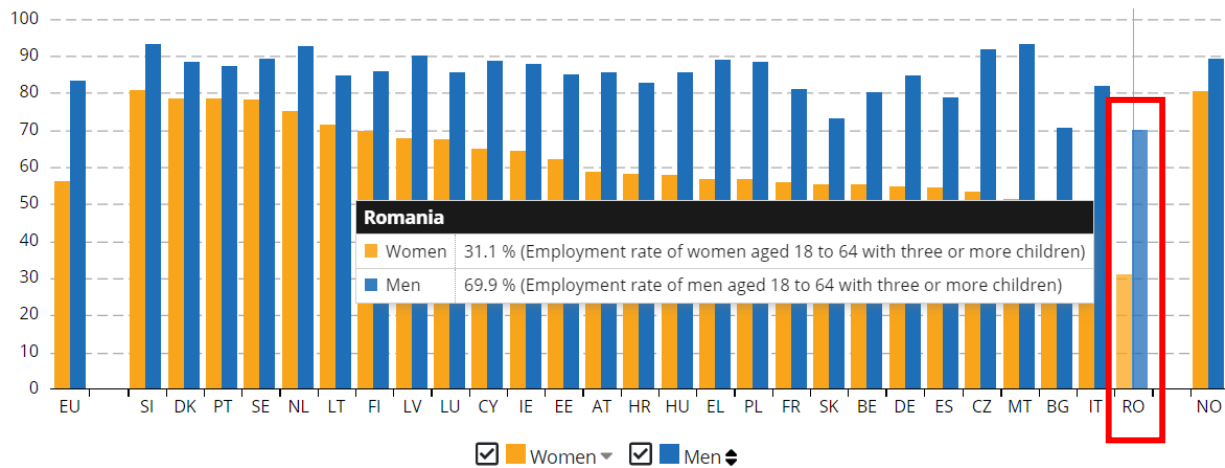


Figure 6. Employment rate of the female and male population aged 16-64, caring for 3 or more children, EU countries (Eurostat, 2024)

According to the literature, the local level of development influences the capacity of a region to promote gender equality (Bîrsănuț & Man, 2023). The North-West Region is in line with these conclusions, being a developed area in terms of economic, educational and living standards (Table 1, excerpted from Bîrsănuț, 2024). These aspects contribute to an overall low level of gender bias in the local population and create a favourable context for combating gender

⁸ The interactive map can be accessed at <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/stories/s/Mapping-the-glass-ceiling-in-the-EU/vtrw-h5vm/>

discrimination and reducing socio-economic gender gaps⁹ (EC: Joint Research Centre, Stamos & Pop, Appendix 1, 2023).

Table 1. Socio-economic characteristics of the development regions in Romania, according to EUROSTAT (2020) and NSI (2020) (from Birsănuș, 2024)

Region	Average income (RON)	% of GDP	Dropout rate (high school)	At-risk-of-poverty rate	Relative poverty rate	Unemployment rate
North-West	3.047 (M) 2.942 (F)	12.29%	1.85%	18.50%	15.50%	2.3%(M)/3.0%(F)
North-East	2.885 (M) 2.867 (F)	10.42%	1.90%	41.40%	35.60%	4.7%(M)/4.6%(F)
West	3.195 (M) 2.952 (F)	9.47%	2.30%	25.50%	20.00%	1.8%(M)/2.6%(F)
Center	3.005 (M) 2.893 (F)	11.23%	2.80%	27.20%	21.90%	3.0%(M)/3.6%(F)
South West	2.850 (M) 2.802 (F)	7.73%	2.10%	38.70%	32.70%	5.6%(M)/5.5%(F)
South	2.954 (M) 2.810 (F)	11.40%	1.90%	32.60%	23.40%	3.6%(M)/4.2%(F)
South-East	2.811 (M) 2.725 (F)	9.83%	2.10%	43.20%	32.60%	4.8%(M)/4.9%(F)
Bucharest-Ilfov	4.367 (M) 4.146 (F)	27.55%	1.30%	12.60%	2.40%	1.0%(M)/1.3%(F)

Despite significant economic progress and the presence of renowned university and industrial centres, the North West Region faces a number of specific challenges in the field of gender equality. Comparative analysis with other regions of the country reveals both specific strengths and vulnerabilities. According to official statistics, the employment rate of women in the North-West Region is around 60%, below the national average of 62%. Although this region benefits from a growing economic climate, with an expanding IT and industrial sector, women face difficulties in accessing well-paid jobs. The gender pay gap is also a significant problem in the North-West Region. Women earn, on average, 12-15% less than men, even if they work in the same fields or in similar positions. In terms of women's representation in managerial positions, the North-West Region is below the national average. Only 22% of management positions in public administration and the private sector are held by women, compared to 30% in Bucharest-Ilfov and 25% in the West Region. This under-representation is the result of both persistent gender stereotypes and a lack of effective mentoring and career development policies for women. In less developed regions, such as South-West Oltenia, the percentage of women in managerial positions falls drastically to 15%, reflecting a traditionalist organizational culture and a less diversified economic infrastructure. Another relevant aspect is work-life balance. In the North-West Region, the infrastructure of care services for children and dependent persons is underdeveloped, especially in rural areas. This directly affects women's participation in the labour market and their access to management positions

⁹ According to a regional analysis included in Annex 1 of the *Regions 2030 Project: Together for a sustainable future in the North-West Development Region of Romania*. <https://www.nord-vest.ro/proiect-regions-2030/>

Also, the employment rate on the labour market correlated with the number of children places the female population at a disadvantage compared to the male population (Table 2). Therefore, although this percentage registers higher values for women with one child compared to those without children (which can also be explained by the age of entry into the labour market), the values decrease considerably as the number of children increases to two or more. At the opposite pole are the values recorded for the professionally active male population in Romania, where the percentage of employed men increases with the number of children, except for men with three or more children.

Table 2. Employment rate of the female and male population aged 16-64 years, correlated with the number of children, at the Romanian level (Eurostat, 2024)

% employees	No children	1 child	2 children	3 or more children
Women	54.8%	60.8%	55.4%	31.1%
Men	70.5%	81.9%	82.6%	69.9%

The correlation between professional activity and parenthood that disadvantages the female population in Romania can be explained by the level of gender bias towards their social, financial and political independence, with reference to the freedom of access to representative or managerial positions. At the level of the North-West Region, the score of the *Gender Perception Index for Leadership Positions* (PIGEM¹⁰) indicates a predominant spatial distribution (Fig. 7) of low and medium levels of gender bias across the 6 counties of the region (Bîrsănuț, 2025).

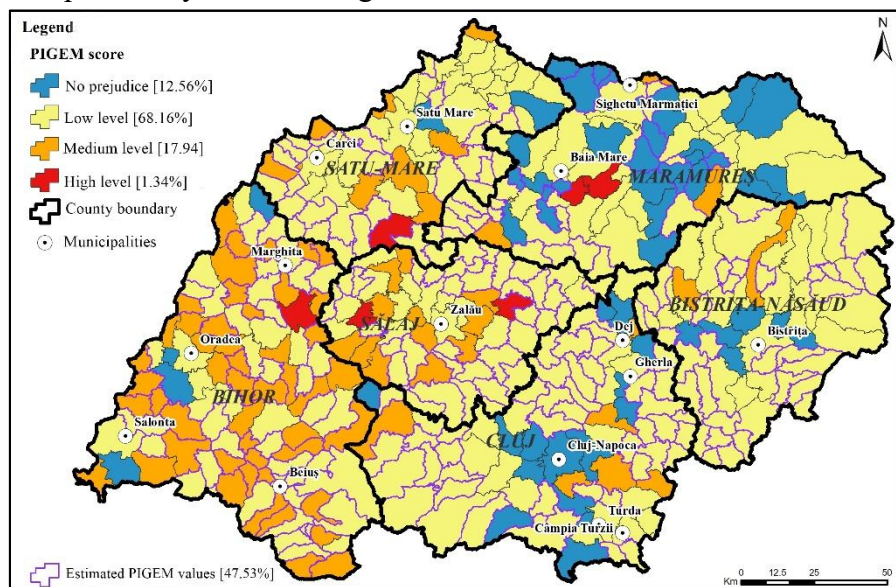


Figure 7. Spatial distribution of the PIGEM score at the level of administrative-territorial units in the North-West Region (extracted from Bîrsănuț, PhD Thesis, 2022)

This index also provides a detailed analysis of gender bias in the North-West Region, differentiated by sex and by relevant societal dimensions: *education, economics, politics, private/family space*, as well as *safety and quality of life* (Fig. 8).

¹⁰ Details on the index methodology and full results of the North-West Region research can be accessed in [Bîrsănuț, 2024](#); [Bîrsănuț, 2025](#); [Bîrsănuț & Man, 2023](#)

According to the results, prejudices of the male population have higher levels than those of women, especially in relation to women's independence in the economic, political and private spheres. However, a number of prejudices also prevail among the female population, especially related to the contestation of their traditional role, which restricts their activity to the domestic and family sphere (Bîrsănuț, 2025).

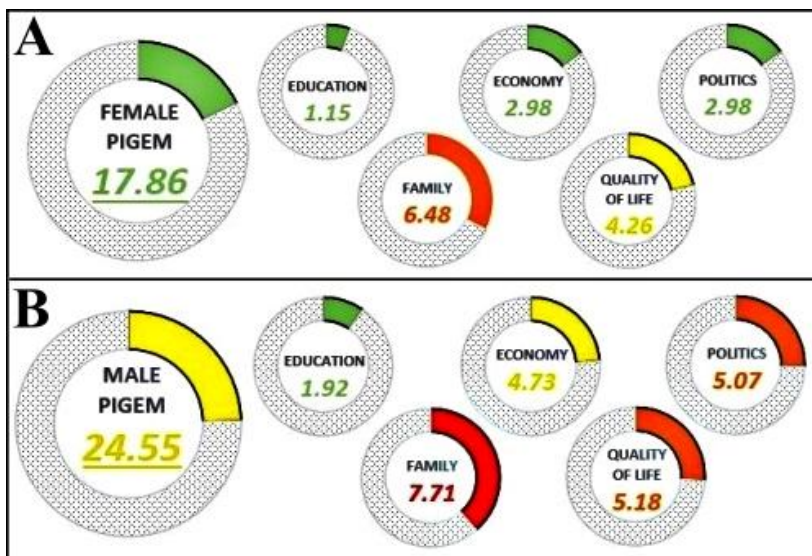


Figure 8. PIGEM score overall and by size, by gender (from Bîrsănuț, 2025)

These results may explain, at least for the North-West Region, the conclusions provided by Eurostat on the low labour market participation of the female population in Romania. This is also reflected in data from the National Institute of Statistics (Guga & Sindreștean, 2021) on the distribution of family responsibilities by gender and income gaps between women and men (Fig. 9).

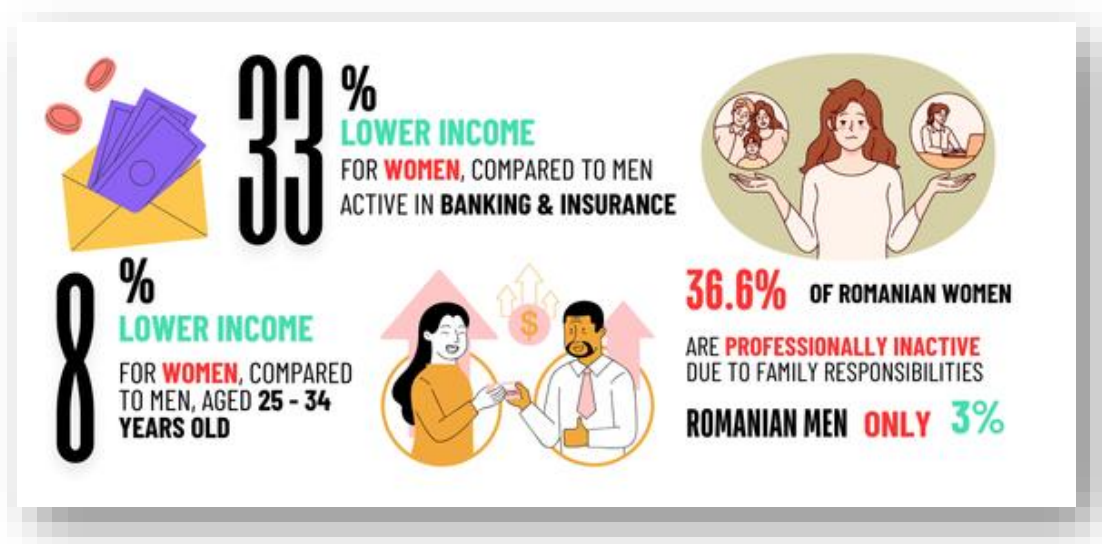


Figure 9. Gender gaps in employment and earnings (NSI, 2019)

2. National legislative framework for the implementation of gender equality

The legislative framework at national level has undergone a number of changes in recent years, having a direct contribution on the compliance with the European and international directives to which Romania adheres. As a member of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations, the Romanian State is committed to the harmonization and proper implementation of national legislation with European and international standards and policies on gender equality. However, legislation at national level has a number of gaps both in the wording of the directives and in the way they are implemented at national, regional or local level.

The terminology used in the legislative context on *gender equality* integrates this concept (having an intersectional dimension) with several levels in the social sphere by equating it with the concept of *equal opportunities (between women and men)*. The definition of *gender* and *gender equality* was introduced in 2015 in [Law 202/2002](#) (the main legislative directive on gender, equal opportunities and anti-discrimination), but without an integration of the concepts in related laws at national and regional level (Băluță & Dumitru, 2023). The alignment of the national legislative framework with the European one from a gender equality perspective is all the more hampered by the socio-cultural aspects and *anti-gender* movements existing in the Romanian space in recent years.

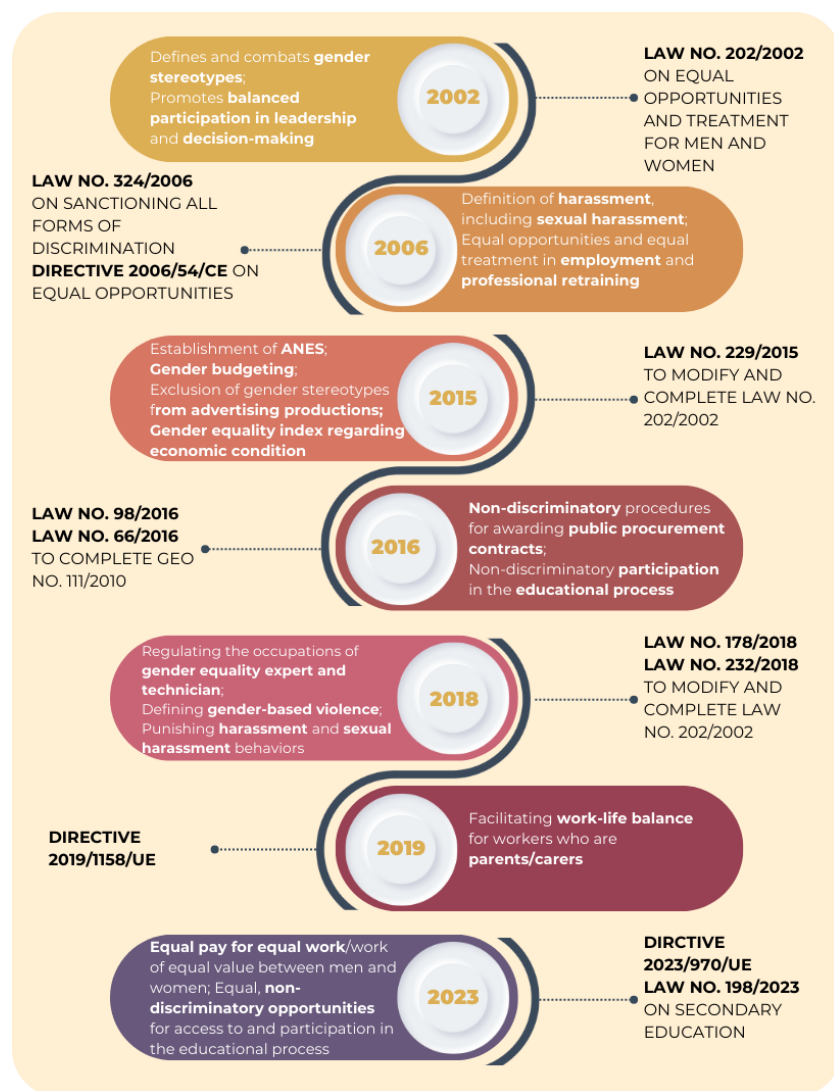


Figure 10. Evolution of the legislative framework in Romania from a gender equality perspective

The 2018 referendum on the definition of the family (MO, 2024; Norocel & Băluță, 2021), the opposition to the introduction of sex education in the school curriculum (Dinu, 2022), as well as the cultural and religious debates on the role of women in Romanian society (Băluță, 2020) are just some of the issues that hinder the progress of adapting the legislative framework and its implementation in line with European directives.

This chapter briefly analyses the recent evolution and the main issues present in the national legislative framework on gender mainstreaming, equal opportunities, anti-discrimination and gender equality in the context of sustainable development, in relation to the European directives in force, to which Romania is committed to comply.

2.1. Gender Budgeting and Gender Responsive Procurement

According to the information brief of the EU-funded [EU for Gender Equality: Reform Assistance Service](#) Project (NIRAS, 2023), *Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB)* is a governance tool sensitive to gender-equitable representation in the restructuring of budget revenues and expenditures in order to respect the SDGs, human rights and equal opportunities. In other words, GRB involves *integrating a gender perspective into the budget process* with the aim of monitoring the impact of budgets on women and men. The analysis of the effects on gender equality subsequently enables the adjustment of legislation and public policies to reduce gender inequality and discrimination.

At the national level, there is only one legislative reference to GRB in *Art. 4, point k of Law No. 229/2015*, adopted to complement *Law No. 202/2002*. The law aims at *equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men* and introduces the definition of *gender budgeting*, without additional provisions. The implementation of the legal provisions on GRB remains deficient at the national level, despite legislative and institutional progress in recent years, such as: the introduction of the [FOREXEBUG](#) system for monitoring expenditure and reporting as a form of transposition of ED 2011/85/EU (EU Council, 2011) into Romanian legislation, the establishment of [the Directorate for the Coordination of Policies and Priorities](#) within the General Secretariat of the Government (SGG, 2003), or the adoption of [HG 427/2022](#) and [HG 467/2022](#) with reference to the obligation to link the budget to the political priorities in force.

Table 3. Legislative framework on gender budgeting and public procurement

Legislative framework	Provisions
Law No 229/2015 amending and supplementing Law No 202/2002	The law defines gender budgeting : analyzing the public budget to identify its impact on women's and men's lives and allocating financial resources to respect the principle of equal opportunities between women and men
Law No 98/2016, as amended and supplemented	The law provides that public procurement procedures must be non-discriminatory and apply the principles of equal treatment.

With regard to *gender-sensitive public procurement*, the application of gender equality principles is required in public procurement procedures on a non-discriminatory basis by [Law No. 98/2016](#). It imposes a number of principles on public procurement, including *non-discrimination, equal treatment and transparency*, without any specific reference to *gender equality or equal opportunities between women and men*.

Although these are the only existing legislative measures at the national level regarding GRB and public procurement, these concepts are also mentioned in subchapter [3.1 Financing programs](#) with reference to the [National Program for Women's Economic and Political Empowerment 2024-2028/2025-2029, Component 8 - Mainstreaming Gender in Public Policies and Budgeting Processes](#) (ANES, 2023). Beyond these aspects, the concepts discussed are not fully integrated into the broad legislative framework, and their compliance, implementation and monitoring still need to be improved in order to better correlate them with national and European measures and policies.

2.2. Gender discrimination and equal opportunities

The main legislative provisions on gender discrimination and equal opportunities and treatment between women and men are contained in Laws no. 202/2002 and no. 217/2003, respectively. The recent evolution of the legislative framework in Romania brings with it a series of amendments and additions, in line with the rules and recommendations laid down in international documents to which Romania is committed.

The amendment and completion of Law 202/2002 through the adoption by the Parliament of [Law 229/2015](#) and [Law 178/2018](#) on Equal Opportunities and Equal Treatment between Women and Men (Table 4) contribute to the fulfilment of international and European obligations to which the Romanian State has committed itself (CEDAW, Istanbul Convention, [HeForShe](#) campaign¹¹). Also, the new provisions allow for a harmonious integration of the principles of equality and anti-discrimination in all areas of activity, including through the consolidation of legal employment relationships (Măriuca et al., 2019).

The legislative progress is also reflected in the adoption of [Law no. 61/2013](#) which, in addition to defining forms of discrimination (including gender discrimination), also establishes sanctions through civil, criminal or administrative liability for actions that disadvantage a person. Also, as a signatory to the *European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, Romania is subject to [Directive 2004/113/EC](#) of the European Council by ensuring the *principle of equal treatment between women and men in the access to and supply of goods and services*.

¹¹ *The HeForShe* campaign aims to effectively implement the principle of gender equality through the creation of new occupations, as well as the inclusion of gender equality experts/technicians in 70% of national and local public institutions in Romania by 2020 (Măriuca et al., 2019)

Table 4. Legislative framework on gender discrimination and equal opportunities

Legislative framework	Provisions
Law 202/2002 on equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men	Central and local, civil and military public institutions and authorities, economic and social units, as well as political parties, employers' and trade union organizations and other non-profit entities operating in accordance with their statutes, shall promote and support the balanced participation of women and men in management and decision-making and shall take the necessary measures to ensure the balanced participation of women and men in management and decision-making.
Law no. 61/2013 amending OG no. 137/2000 on the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination	The law defines discrimination of all kinds, including gender discrimination , as any apparently neutral practice or criteria that disadvantages someone and penalizes it by civil, criminal or administrative liability.
Law No 229/2015 amending and supplementing Law No 202/2002.	ANES between Women and Men is established, a specialized body of the central public administration, which promotes the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men in order to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination . Advertising companies are obliged to be aware of and respect the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment and not to use gender stereotypes in their advertising.
Law No 178/2018 amending and supplementing Law No 202/2002	The law stipulates that the INCSMPS is responsible for promoting and ensuring equal opportunities and equal treatment between men and women . The Law on Equal Opportunities and Equal Treatment for Women and Men introduces the occupation of equal opportunities expert and equal opportunities technician and lists the main responsibilities of the expert/technician within a company.
European Council Directive 2004/113/EC	As a signatory to the <i>European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms</i> , Romania has adopted this directive on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services .

Despite the legislative progress noted, a number of vulnerabilities of the legislation in force are also highlighted. The optional nature of the introduction of gender equality expert/technician occupations contributes to the delay in real progress. Insufficient allocation of human resources to ANES, together with the lack of mechanisms to monitor progress, points to the need to implement additional mechanisms for inter-institutional cooperation in order to achieve long-term goals.

2.3. Gender-based violence and combating sexual harassment

In order to harmonize the national legislation with the provisions of the *Istanbul Convention*, the **definition of gender-based violence** was introduced in [Law no. 178/2018](#) to complement the previous legislative provisions that referred strictly to *domestic violence*. Thus, both violence against women and men are now mentioned, emphasizing beyond domestic violence also *sexual violence, forced abortion, forced marriage, trafficking in human beings*, etc.

Table 5. Legislative framework on gender-based violence (such as violence against women and gender minorities)

Legislative framework	Provisions
Law 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence (republished)	The Ministry of Education and Research is obliged to take the necessary measures to introduce learning activities on combating gender-based violence and non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships into the school curriculum implemented in the classroom. Judges, prosecutors, police representatives, non-governmental organizations and public institutions working in this field can carry out extra-curricular activities in pre-university education on topics related to domestic violence.
Law No 211/2004 on some measures to ensure the protection of crime victims	The law sets out measures taken to inform, assist and compensate victims of different types of crime, including gender-based violence.
Law No 178/2018 amending and supplementing Law No 202/2002	Introduced the definition of gender-based violence in line with Article 3(d) of the Istanbul Convention . The opening of the national toll-free helpline with the program number 0800500333 to support victims of domestic violence, sexual harassment discrimination and trafficking in human beings, established in 2015, in line with the provisions of Article 24 of the Istanbul Convention.

Less notable progress has also been made in tackling sexual harassment. While the setting of amounts for the punishment of sexually or psychologically harassing behaviour was necessary, the law still has a number of weaknesses which make particular groups in society vulnerable.

Table 6. Legislative framework to combat sexual harassment

Legislative framework	Provisions
Law no. 324/2006 amending and supplementing OG no. 137/2000 on the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination.	Anti-discrimination law which sets out the definition of harassment that can be legally sanctioned on the basis of conduct that creates a hostile, degrading, offensive or intimidating environment, inter alia, through sexual harassment .
Law No 232/2018 on amending and supplementing Law No 202/2002	It expressly prohibits any harassment, sexual harassment or harassing behaviour and psychological harassment, both in public and in private, and has made such behaviour punishable by fines by the police or gendarmerie.

The main focus of the legislative provisions is directed towards public spaces and professional activities, and omits the inclusion of an intersectional perspective of vulnerable or marginalized groups, formed not only on the basis of gender, but also age or ethnicity (Măriuca et al., 2019). Therefore, the need to explicitly and comprehensively regulate all forms of violence against women and girls, including the full diversity of social contexts and socio-economic domains existing at the national level, is noted.

2.4. Combating gender stereotypes

The same law no. 202/2002 (with subsequent amendments and additions) establishes *the definition of gender stereotypes*. It is also complemented by [Law no. 217/2003](#), focused on *preventing and combating domestic violence*, assigns (Chap. II, Art.10, al.1) to the Ministry of Education and Research the responsibility to include in school curricula learning activities on *combating discriminatory stereotypes based on gender roles* (Table 7).

Table 7. Legislative framework on combating gender stereotypes

Legislative framework	Provisions
Law 202/2002 republished with subsequent amendments and additions	The law defines gender stereotypes . A national strategy published in June 2018 focuses on combating gender stereotypes at all ages and at all levels , with the aim of promoting equal opportunities and equal treatment between men and women and combating gender-based violence.
Law 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence	The Ministry of Education and Research has the obligation to take the necessary measures to introduce in the school curriculum implemented in the classroom learning activities on combating discriminatory stereotypes based on gender roles , adapted to the age and understanding of pupils.

The republishing of the law in 2020 also brings with it the mention of ANES as responsible for gender mainstreaming in all policies, programs and research in the field of *artificial intelligence* (Chapter II, art.8, para.7). The role of this provision is to prevent and reduce the risk of perpetuating *sexism, gender stereotypes* and *cyber violence* through the recent technological advances.

Although these provisions are mentioned in the context of preventing and combating acts of violence, their inclusion in national legislation creates a number of obligations for socio-educational authorities to promote an inclusive approach at national level through tools to educate and combat prejudices generated by gender stereotypes. However, in this case too there is a lack of tools to measure and monitor the evolution of gender bias at local level and by development region.

2.5. Equal pay, skills development and digital transformation

Romanian legislation has gradually addressed the issue of *equal pay between women and men*, aligning with both domestic requirements and European directives. [Law no. 61/2013](#), by amending [OG no. 137/2000](#), introduced an explicit framework on the right to equal pay for equal work, emphasizing the prohibition of any form of discrimination. This regulation was subsequently complemented by [Law No. 229/2015](#), which established a statistical index to assess the economic condition of women and men, but without imposing binding mechanisms to enforce the principle of equal pay. With the transposition of [Directive 2023/970/EU](#), Romania committed to adopt additional measures, including pay transparency and effective mechanisms for the application of

this principle, marking a significant step towards strengthening gender equality in the field of employment.

Although the legislation lays down strong principles for equal pay, their effective implementation remains uneven. [Article 159 of the](#) Labor Code prohibits wage discrimination based on sex, but the lack of a robust monitoring and sanctioning mechanism limits the impact of these provisions. The economic index introduced by *Law 229/2015* allows for a general assessment of gender gaps, but is not backed up by tools to ensure their reduction. The adoption of *Directive 2023/970/EU*, while presenting an opportunity to improve transparency and impose clearer standards, does not guarantee successful implementation, which depends on the resources allocated and political will.

Table 8. Equal pay legislative framework

Legislative framework	Provisions
Law no. 61/2013 amending OG no. 137/2000 on the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination	Article 1(2i) guarantees the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work [...] and to equal pay for equal work and to just and favourable remuneration without discrimination of any kind.
Law No 229/2015 amending and supplementing Law No 202/2002.	It introduces a gender equality index on the (statistical) economic status of men and women , without a binding directive on equal pay for equal work, regardless of sex.
Labor Code, Art. 159 on the legal definition of pay and equal treatment	The third point of the article stipulates that there can be no discrimination on the basis of sex (among other things) in determining and awarding pay.
Council Directive 2023/970/EU on equal pay for equal work	As a member of the EU, Romania adopts the directive on transparency and the mechanism for applying the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women.

While the legislative framework contains important measures, there are gaps which undermine the effectiveness of promoting equal pay. The lack of binding directives to close the pay gap by 2023 reflects an insufficient approach to the problem. Also, sanction mechanisms for employers practicing pay discrimination are poorly defined. The transposition of *Directive 2023/970/EU* should be accompanied by awareness-raising campaigns, the creation of transparent pay reporting mechanisms and closer cooperation between institutions. Another major shortcoming is the lack of detailed data and continuous monitoring, which makes it difficult to identify problems in a timely manner and measure progress.

Romania has also made progress in mainstreaming gender equality in skills development and digital transformation through specific regulations. [Law No. 178/2018](#) made a significant contribution by introducing the occupations of *gender equality expert and technician*, requiring public and private institutions with more than 50 employees to designate a person responsible for the implementation of gender equality competences. This regulation is an important step towards providing a formal framework to support gender mainstreaming in organizational policies and decision-making.

The implementation of equal opportunities in the field of education and training is supported by [Law No 198/2023](#) on secondary education, which provides equal access to education

for all pupils regardless of gender. These legislative measures ensure an inclusive educational environment, preparing young people for a digital future that respects the principles of gender equality. At the same time, European Council [Directive 2006/54/EC](#) strengthens the national framework, ensuring that equal opportunities are a priority, including access to employment and continuing vocational training.

Table 9. Legislative framework on skills development and gender-sensitive digital transformation

Legislative framework	Provisions
Law No 178/2018 amending and supplementing Law No 202/2002	It regulates the general regime of the occupations of gender equality expert and gender equality technician , as well as the duties related to these occupations, introducing the possibility for public and private sector legal entities with more than 50 employees to hire or identify an employee to whom they assign gender equality competences through the job description.
Law No 198/2023 on secondary education	The law (art. 2d, art. 3i) grants equal opportunities of access and participation in the educational process without any discrimination, including gender discrimination.
Council Directive 2006/54/EC on equal opportunities	As a member of the EU, this directive is binding in Romania and states that men and women must have equal opportunities and be treated equally in employment and occupation (recast) .

However, significant gaps exist. While legislation provides a general framework, there are no specific guidelines for mainstreaming gender equality in digital competences, which limits the impact of the digital transformation on closing the gender gap. The lack of active policies to promote women's access to technology and STEM training programs emphasizes the need for additional measures, including awareness campaigns and grants dedicated to women in technology fields. To ensure real impact, legislation needs to be complemented with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress on an ongoing basis.

2.6. Work-life balance

The legislative framework on work-life balance has evolved significantly in recent years in Romania, influenced by European legislation and changing social needs. [Government Emergency Ordinance No 111/2010](#), as amended, establishes essential rights for parents, such as parental leave and the associated allowance. In addition, [Law No. 66/2016](#) promotes equal opportunities in access to education, including through the gender dimension, and [Directive 2019/1158/EU](#) outlines Romania's task to implement measures facilitating *the reconciliation of work and family life*, such as *flexible work organization* and *specific leave for parents and carers*.

The degree of implementation of gender equality in this context remains, however, an area with multiple challenges. Although there are clear provisions in the Labour Code, such as the personalization of working hours ([Art. 113](#)), and legislation supporting men's access to paternity leave ([Law 210/1999](#) as amended), these benefits and mechanisms are little used. Cultural norms and the lack of active promotion of these rights create obstacles to their uniform application. Thus, legislative measures have the potential to encourage equality, but their practical implementation varies by sector, location and employer.

Table 10. Work-life balance legislative framework

Legislative framework	Provisions
Government Emergency Ordinance No 111/2010, as amended and supplemented	The GEO provides for parental leave and monthly parental allowance.
Law No 66/2016 amending and supplementing GEO No 111/2010	The law (art. 2d, art. 3i) grants equal opportunities of access and participation in the educational process without any discrimination, including gender discrimination.
Council Directive 2019/1158/EU repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU	The Directive is binding in Romania and lays down minimum requirements designed to make it easier for workers who are parents or carers to reconcile work and family life . These include parental leave and flexible working arrangements for working parents/carers.
Law No 210/1999 amended by GEO No 117/2002 on paternity leave	The law sets out the conditions under which male workers can take paid paternity leave .
Labor Code, Art. 113 on personalized working hours	The article provides for the possibility to opt for an unequal distribution of working time in order for employees to maintain a balanced relationship between work and domestic/parental responsibilities .

Legislative gaps therefore persist and affect the effectiveness of these measures. For example, flexitime regulations are not uniformly applied and parental leave does not include clear mechanisms to monitor its use. In addition, current legislation does not sufficiently address *gender stereotyping at work* or other forms of *indirect discrimination*. To improve these issues, a review of the legal framework is needed, with a focus on concrete implementation measures and raising awareness among employers and employees of the *benefits of work-life balance*.

3. Evaluation of the implementation of gender equality policies in the North-West Region

3.1. Funding programs

The gender dimension is included at **national level** in a number of funding programs¹², either with specific priorities to combat gender discrimination or generating change through education and training of young people.

The *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Program 2021-2027* (CEDV), implemented in Romania through the Ministry of Culture, includes two reference strands. First, the *Equality, Rights and Gender Equality* component focuses on combating discrimination and promoting equity, gender equality and gender mainstreaming at all levels of society. Secondly, the *Daphne* strand focuses on combating all forms of violence, including gender-based violence (against girls and

¹² The updated list of national programs financed from the State Budget can be accessed at: <https://oportunitati-ue.gov.ro/programe-de-finantare/programe-nationale/>

women, domestic violence, violence against LGBTQ people, etc.), a dimension where Romania records worrying statistics, which are not reduced by the legislative measures in force.¹³

*The national program to support couples and single people*¹⁴, with funding from the state budget between 01.01.2023-31.12.2023 through the Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities, aimed to increase the birth rate at national level by providing medical procedures dedicated to women aged 25-45 years with infertility problems. Also in the family sphere, the *Investment that Matters* campaign by the same ministry was launched. This program offers courses for young married couples, as well as parenting courses to reduce divorce rates, domestic violence and increase gender equity through early education. In synergy with these initiatives, the *Youth and Students Policies and Activities Program* Socio-Educational was also launched. Although it is not gender-focused, the issues covered by the specific objectives (sexuality education, reducing unemployment and school drop-out rates, etc.) contribute to the development of an equitable and inclusive society at national level.

Probably the most comprehensive program to support female entrepreneurship is the *Women Entrepreneur* Program¹⁵ running from 2022-2027 and funded by the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism / Agencies for Small and Medium Enterprises. Such initiatives have the potential to significantly balance the entrepreneurial sphere in Romania by creating the necessary levers for the female population to become more involved in the economic sphere. In this way, the gender inequalities observed in the structure of SMEs in Romania, where male entrepreneurs predominate, are reduced.

The home provider, a program funded by the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity through the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR), contributes to increasing work-life balance, as well as to increasing quality of life and reducing gender inequalities in the private sphere.

EEA and Norway Grants, managed by the Ministry of European Investment and Projects, were accessed for a total of 155 projects¹⁶ implemented **within the North-West Region**, covering about 15% of the total funding mechanisms accessed at national level in the period 2014-2021. Of these, a number of funded projects focused on gender issues such as *combating domestic violence* by equipping recovery centres for victims, developing information and education campaigns and establishing cooperation partnerships between public and private entities to improve intervention mechanisms. *FEMPOWER project* brought together experts from the medical, local and social authorities in a series of multidisciplinary training sessions to increase the quality of life and services available to women from the LGBTQ+ community. On an upward trend, the number of projects funded by EEA and Norwegian grants¹⁷ has steadily increased with each funding period,

¹³ For details on the legislative gaps and measures to combat violence at national level, please see the material produced by Ionuț Benea for Free Europe Romania: <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/brataril-electronice/32860112.html>

¹⁴ The program ran throughout 2023 and the results can be accessed on the Ministry's website: <https://mfamilie.gov.ro/1/cresterea-natalitatii/>

¹⁵ The 2024 edition of the program registered more than 6000 applications for funding

¹⁶ Details of projects funded in 2014-2021: <https://data.eeagrants.org/2014-2021/projects/?beneficiary=RO#projects>

¹⁷ Historical statistics on projects funded at national level from EEA and Norway Grants can be found at: <https://data.eeagrants.org/compare/?beneficiary=RO>

with the main focus sectors being *innovation, research, education and competitiveness, and human and social development*.

[The North West Regional Programme 2021-2027](#) (RP NW) supports education, digitalization, continuous vocational training and the development of SME competitiveness and innovation, but without specific guidelines to combat gender inequality. Instead, it mentions the program's alignment with the principles set out in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and ensures that *gender equality, gender mainstreaming and gender mainstreaming are respected and promoted* in the objectives of the regional program (p. 18).

Thus, the gender dimension is presented as a horizontal principle, being applied at all stages of project implementation. Therefore, funded projects must demonstrate measures that promote inclusion and equal access for all citizens, involving:

- ***Promoting equitable access to opportunities*** - through projects that encourage women's participation in male-dominated economic sectors, such as STEM or digitization.
- ***Inclusion in infrastructure and services*** - the specific needs of users (including women, people with disabilities and disadvantaged groups) are taken into account.
- ***Monitoring and evaluation*** - collecting sex-disaggregated data to track progress on equitable participation.

The RP NW 2021-2027 aims to strengthen an inclusive, equitable and sustainable economy (with gender mainstreaming implicitly rather than explicitly), as well as to reduce inequalities in education and emerging sectors and improve quality of life through the measures and policies described in Figure 11.

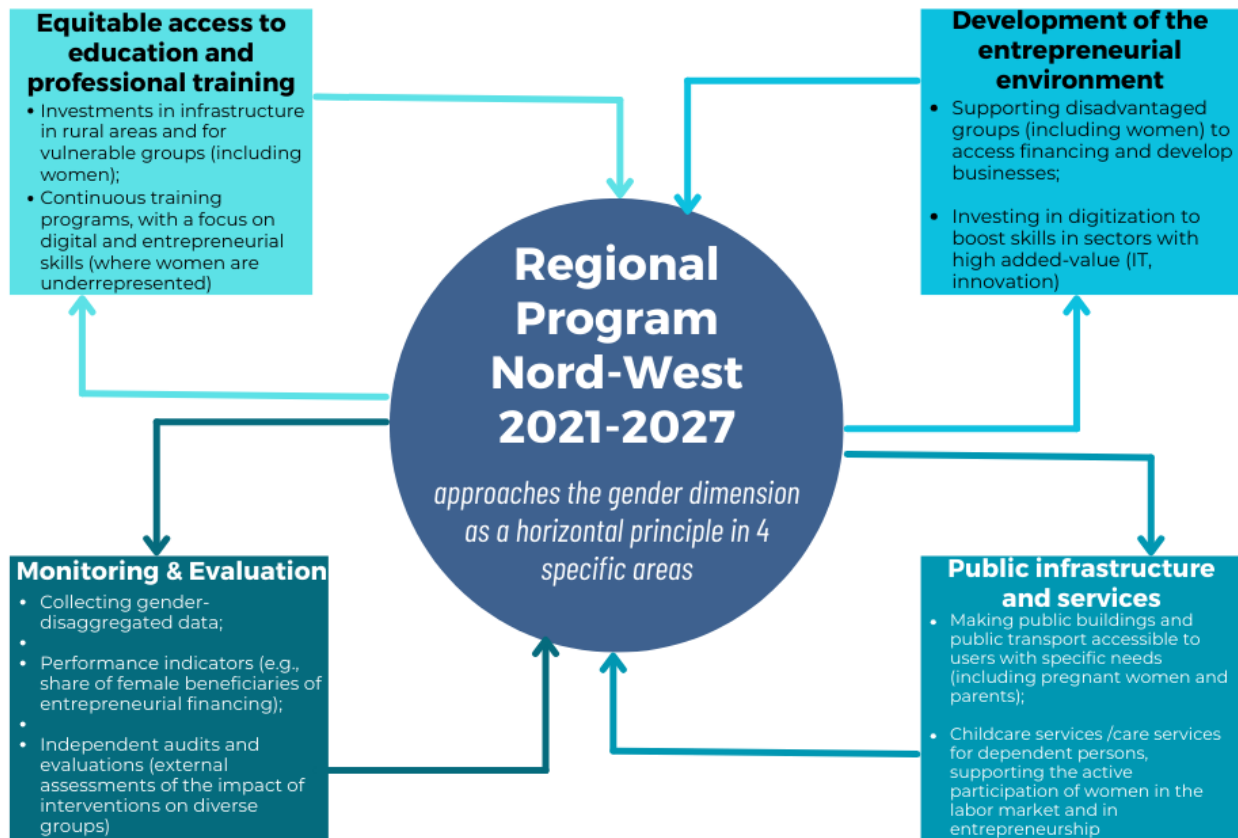


Figure 11. Measures and policies targeting the gender dimension as a horizontal principle in the RP North-West 2021-2027

Among the objectives of the RP NW, Priority 1 of the North-West Region focuses on increasing the competitiveness and sustainability of SMEs by developing the digital and entrepreneurial skills of the population, without a priority investment in reducing gender inequalities in the socio-economic environment. However, the diversity of priority development objectives in the region indirectly contributes to increasing access and retention of the female population in inclusive professional environments. For example, the RP NW 2021-2027 includes a number of strategic documents for SMEs (applicant's guide, business plan, technical-financial assessment grid) that aim to enhance sustainable growth and competitiveness. Within them, gender equality is treated as a horizontal principle, in line with EU requirements, being mainstreamed at various stages of the project selection and implementation process (Fig. 12).

Addressing the gender dimension in SMEs (PR NW 2021-2027)

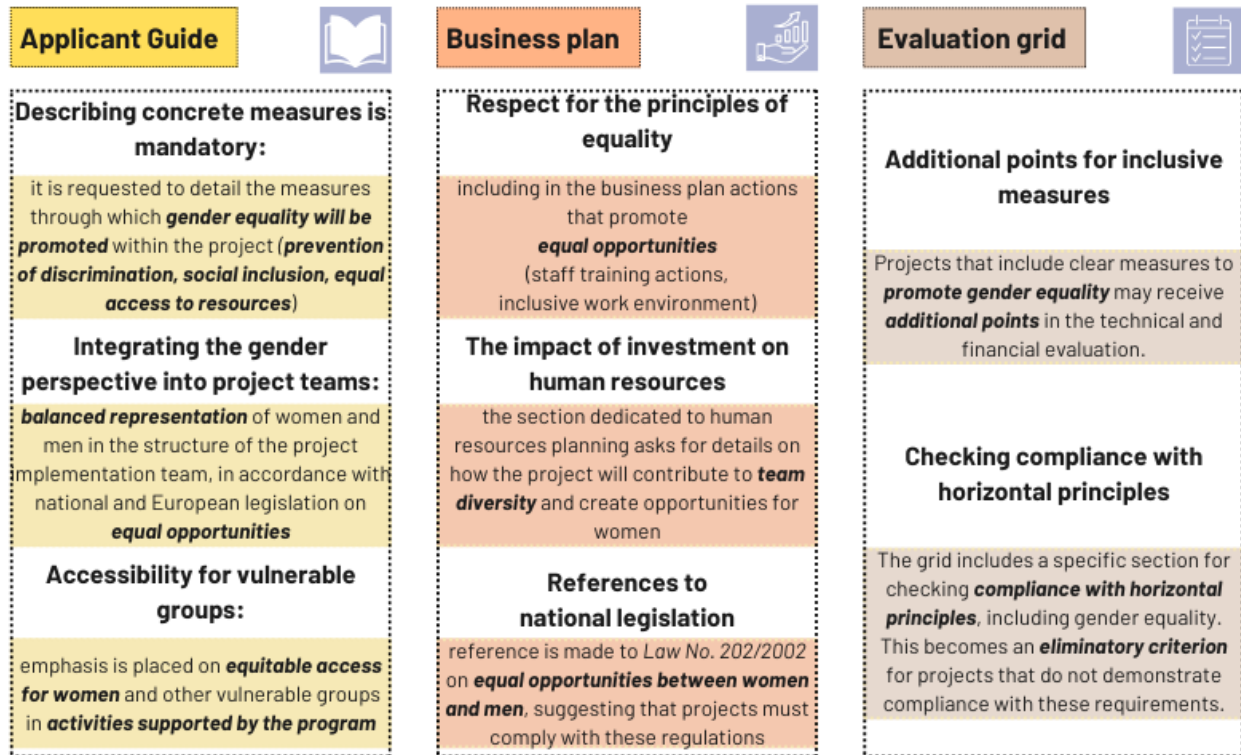


Figure 12. Addressing gender equality in the guide, business plan and evaluation grid for SMEs in the North-West Regional Program 2021-2027

In conclusion, the reviewed strategy documents demonstrate a progressive integration of gender mainstreaming in project selection and implementation processes. However, there are important gaps in monitoring and measuring the impact of gender equality measures.

3.2. Development plans

The correlation of the North-West PR 2021-2027 with other strategic documents, such as the Regional Development Plan for the North-West Region (RDP NW), is remarkable. The current direction of regional development fits into a context characterized by continuous concerns at regional level regarding the development of human resources and economic competitiveness. Thus, the current concern at regional level is influenced by the previous strategic documents that have created a favourable framework for the increasingly explicit inclusion of the gender dimension and of policies and measures aimed at increasing the level of gender equality in the region.

For example, since previous programming exercises, *The Regional [Programming Human Resources Development Northern Transylvania 2007-2013 Document](#)* has paid special attention to *equal opportunities* within the horizontal priorities (p. 68). Thus, it was proposed to reduce gender discrimination in education, employment and unemployment rates, with a particular focus on balancing the work-life balance through measures dedicated to the fair distribution of

responsibilities and the sustainable integration of the female population into the labour market after maternity leave. Also, *The Regional [Programming Economic Competitiveness 2007-2013 Document](#)* of the North-West Region included a series of information on the labour market, vocational training and human resources development that can provide a solid basis for the development of concrete measures on gender equality in the region. Thus, although gender differences in labour productivity are not specified, general trends suggest a *favourable context for the implementation of gender equality policies*.

[North-West Regional Development Plan 2014-2020](#) continues the concerns of previous periods by mainstreaming gender as a **cross-cutting principle**. Gender equality is referred to in the context of the general principles of non-discrimination and social inclusion, but without detailing clear objectives, specific measures or indicators for monitoring. Thus, the RDP 2014-2020 is deficient from the perspective of monitoring the impact on gender equality and tracking progress from this perspective is difficult

In the current reporting period, [North-West Regional Development Plan 2021-2027](#) (RDP NW) shows a positive development on strengthening the gender dimension by identifying gender equality as a key component of social inclusion, with specific references to measures to reduce existing gaps. The RDP 2021-2027 also introduces gender disaggregated indicators to assess the impact of projects differentially on women and men.

Thus, the RDP 2021-2027 highlights **wider gender gaps in terms of unemployment, with women holding a share of 58.3% in the labour market compared to 77.2% for men, thus highlighting the economic vulnerability of the female population**, whose level increases in periods of economic crisis. With a balanced participation in education, **gender segregation** is noticeable **horizontally, with women having a lower representation in certain technical and professional fields**. The document also highlights a number of **notable urban-rural disparities in women's access to education and well-paid jobs**. However, the development plan mentions and refers to a number of measures, policies and strategies that support gender equality, such as:

- *Link with Specific Objective 4 of the European Cohesion Policy*: promoting decent work and economic growth, with a focus on improving working conditions for women and vulnerable people;
- *Vocational education and training*: dedicated programs to support women in technical and entrepreneurial fields so as to reduce gender gaps in emerging sectors;
- *Social inclusion*: improving women's access to social services, education and health care; combating discrimination and promoting the inclusion of women from disadvantaged communities;
- *Regional Strategy for Sustainable Mobility*: ensuring equal access for women and men to essential jobs and services;
- *Rural Development Programs*: supporting women's entrepreneurship and local initiatives for the active involvement of women in the development of rural communities.

Analysing the evolution of the level of gender mainstreaming in the regional development plans, the shift from addressing gender equality as a general principle, without specific details or measures (RDP NW 2014-2020), to the introduction of objectives and actions aimed at promoting gender equality as a horizontal principle in all sectors and the integration of gender-disaggregated indicators for effective monitoring (RDP NW 2021-2027).

The current North-West regional development policy is therefore aligned with the objectives specified in the European Commission's [Action Plan for Gender Equality](#) which aims to *promote gender equality and empower women and girls in all external actions of the European Union*. The RDP NW 2021-2027 thus provides a series of measures integrated into the development strategy. Although concerns on gender equality and social inclusion are mentioned, more detailed and dedicated implementation is needed to reduce gender disparities, particularly in the areas of work, education and equitable access to economic resources.

3.3. Strategies and action plans to ensure gender equality

The framework set by the EU [Strategy Gender Equality 2020-2025](#) encourages Member States to take an intersectional approach to the implementation of gender equality, aiming, among other things, at measures to ensure [pay transparency](#), [gender balance in decision-making positions](#) and [combating gender stereotypes](#). Measures such as those ensuring equitable participation in decision-making, equal access to education and reducing gender disparities in the labour market are indirect instruments that are extremely useful in developing entrepreneurial initiatives at regional level in a manner that aligns with the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion in socio-professional environments.

At the national level, a number of strategies approved by government decrees in recent years (Table 11) highlight the growing concern of responsible authorities for gender mainstreaming approaches. As of 2018, the legislative framework has been aligned with the EU targets on [achieving the SDGs](#), including Goal 5 - gender equality

Table 11. Work-life balance legislative framework

Legislative framework	Provisions
National Strategy to achieve Romania's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals of Nov. 9, 2018	The strategy published by the Government makes reference to SDG 5 - Gender Equality , listing existing legislative measures (listed above) and proposed measures to achieve the targets.
GOVERNMENT DECISION No 365/24.05.2018	GD on the approval of the National Strategy for encouraging the reconciliation of work, family and private life for the period 2018-2021 and the Operational Plan for the implementation of the strategy.
GOVERNMENT DECISION No 365/24.05.2018	GD on the approval of the National Strategy on promoting equal opportunities between women and men and preventing and combating domestic violence for the period 2018-2021 and the Operational Plan for the implementation of the Strategy.
GOVERNMENT DECISION No 1.547/2022	The GD approves the National Strategy for promoting equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men and for preventing and combating domestic violence for the period 2022-2027 .
National strategy on social inclusion and poverty reduction 30/03/2022	Although the strategy for the period 2022-2027 does not specifically refer to gender, it refers to the development of digital competences at all levels of education in order to reduce digital divides and increase the socio-economic inclusion of the general population .

[GD no. 365/24.05.2018](#) approved the national strategy and the operational plan for its implementation, dedicated to the promotion of equal opportunities and equal treatment between

women and men. On the one hand, the [National Strategy on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men for 2018-2021](#) aims to address the structural problems hindering women's social and economic progress, integrating European directives on equal treatment in employment and parental leave. Based on the premise that gender inequalities are the result of historically unequal power relations between women and men, leading to discrimination against women and preventing their full participation in social and economic life, the strategy emphasizes that equal opportunities are not limited to the public sphere but also include private life relations. It thus targets several specific measures within priority areas that address gender equality issues in socio-professional environments, such as:

1. *Education and combating stereotypes:*
 - a. Tackling gender bias by mainstreaming this principle into school curricula and promoting STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) careers for girls;
 - b. Mentoring and training programs for girls are needed to support them in choosing a variety of careers and give them confidence in their abilities.

2. *Labor market and economic inclusion:*
 - a. measures to reduce the employment and pay gap between women and men; support women to access jobs in male-dominated areas and promote female entrepreneurship, especially in rural areas;
 - b. promoting retraining as a measure to integrate women into the labour market;
 - c. implementing policies to facilitate work-life balance, through flexible leave, childcare and family-friendly work schedules.

To achieve these objectives, the strategy proposes a series of institutional measures to be implemented through ANES such as: *the introduction of gender quotas in public administration, the organization of training and mentoring for women in leadership positions and the assessment of the impact of government policies on gender equality*

On the other hand, the [Operational Action Plan](#) for the implementation of this strategy includes measures to strengthen the capacity of ANES by allocating adequate resources and implementing an effective monitoring system for the enforcement of equal opportunities legislation. It is proposed to mainstream a gender perspective in all government policies and programs, implement gender responsive budgeting and reduce economic gaps through training and support programs for female entrepreneurship. This provides a clear framework for eliminating gender inequality which, for implementation, requires an intersectional approach through the cooperation of central, regional and local authorities and civil society.

By [GD 1.547/19.12.2022 the National Strategy on the Promotion of Equal Opportunities and Equal Treatment between Women and Men 2022-2027](#) was approved, thus demonstrating continuity in the legislative framework on gender equality. The Strategy comes as a necessary and timely response to gender equity challenges at the national level, aiming at eliminating discrimination and creating an environment in which both women and men have equal opportunities for development and affirmation. Thus, the **main objective** of the strategy is to *promote equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men in all spheres of social, economic and political life. It aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination and ensure equal access to education, the labour market and decision-making positions.* Essentially, the strategy aims to

build a society in which rights and responsibilities are shared equally between women and men, and opportunities for personal and professional development are gender-neutral.

To support this overall objective, the strategy aims to **eliminate gender stereotypes and prejudices in the education system**. By introducing a gender perspective in the curriculum and revising school textbooks, it aims to create generations that understand and practice equity from the earliest years of schooling. Inclusive education and continuous teacher training are essential to prevent the perpetuation of stereotypes in society.

Another important objective is to **reduce the pay gap and the low employment rate among women**. To this end, the strategy promotes wage transparency and fair employment policies. Particular attention is paid to removing barriers that prevent women from accessing well-paid jobs and areas where they are under-represented. **Work-life balance** is also a priority. Implementing policies that support flexible working, paternity leave and a fair sharing of family responsibilities between women and men are essential steps in this direction. Work-life balance is seen as a fundamental condition for increasing women's participation in the labour market. **Fair participation of women in decision-making processes** is another strategic objective. The aim is to boost women's access to management positions in public administration and the private sector. Training and mentoring programs are designed to support women in developing the skills needed to take up leadership positions and to contribute to decision-making.

To achieve these goals, the strategy proposes a series of concrete **measures**. In **education**, the introduction of gender equality concepts in school curricula and the revision of textbooks are essential steps to eliminate stereotypes. Teachers will benefit from training programs to understand and promote gender equality in education. In the **labour market**, **wage transparency** will be implemented and **fair employment policies** will be developed. Employers will be encouraged to promote equity in the evaluation and remuneration of employees. **Female entrepreneurship** will be supported through funding and mentoring programs dedicated to women. For **work-life balance**, the strategy proposes the adoption of flexible working and the facilitation of paternity leave. Developing **care services for children** and dependent persons will support families active in the labour market. In the area of participation in decision-making, training and mentoring programs will be organized for women interested in leadership positions. Public institutions and private companies will be encouraged to adopt policies that promote **gender balance in leadership positions**. To ensure the integration of a gender perspective in all public policies, **gender budgeting** will be introduced and **mechanisms to assess the impact of policies on gender equality** will be developed.

The responsibility for implementing the measures lies with **ANES**, which coordinates and monitors the implementation of the strategy. The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity, school inspectorates and local administrations have specific roles in implementing the measures at national and regional level, while the COJES units will ensure the implementation of the measures at local level. The expected results of the implementation of these measures using these implementation mechanisms include aspects related to reducing gender gaps in education, the labour market and decision-making, increasing the number of women in management positions and promoting flexible working to facilitate work-life balance, as well as raising awareness of the importance of gender equality and eliminating stereotypes.

An example of the implementation at institutional level of these national objectives and measures is the [Gender Equality Plan 2023-2027](#) of the SGG (Fig. 13). It includes a series of

objectives and measures to implement the principles of gender equality, diversity and inclusion in the professional environment (Fig. 10), representing a key step to promote equity and diversity in all institutions. The Plan aims to strengthen an inclusive and equitable working environment through a series of strategic objectives and concrete measures, aligned with both the EU Strategy for Gender Equality 2020-2025 and national legislation.

A first objective is to *promote work-life balance*. To this end, it is proposed to implement **flexible working policies**, such as teleworking and part-time programs, and to adopt digital tools to **streamline communication and work planning**. These measures are designed to reduce employee stress, increase satisfaction and make it easier to combine work and personal responsibilities. Awareness campaigns and internal assessments are expected to reinforce an organizational culture that values diversity and inclusion.

Another major objective is to *ensure gender equity in leadership and decision-making*. The plan foresees **regular trainings** for management staff and the revision of institutional documents for **gender mainstreaming**. It aims to **increase the representation of women in management positions** and promote gender balance at all hierarchical levels. These measures are designed to create a **more equitable decision-making structure** and encourage an institutional culture based on respect and equality. In order to support *gender equality in recruitment and career development*, the plan proposes to thoroughly review recruitment and promotion procedures to identify and eliminate gender discrimination. Training to **prevent stereotyping** and **campaigns to disseminate good practice** on women's careers are foreseen. Expected results include a **transparent, fair and accessible recruitment process for all**, together with an increase in the number of women in leadership positions.

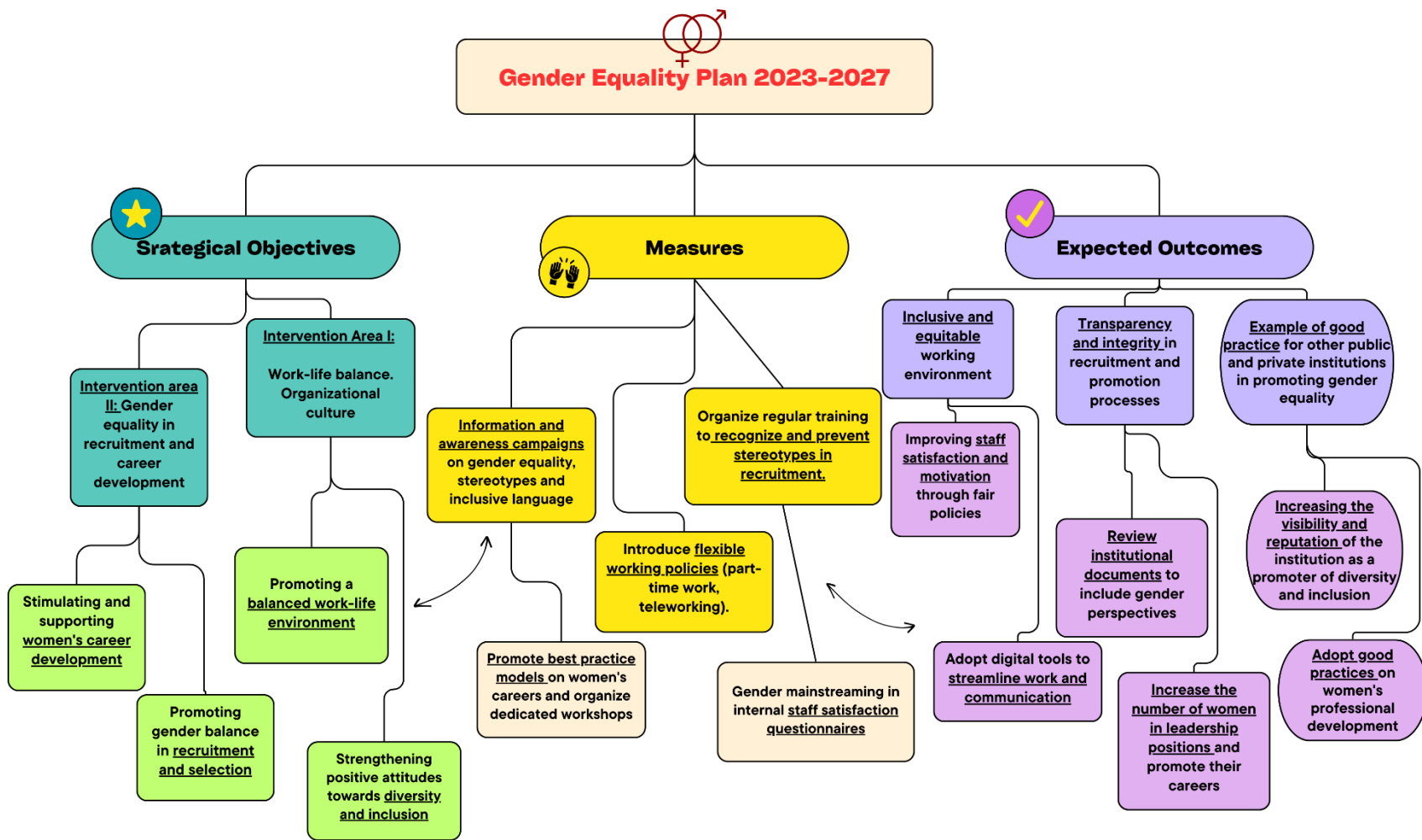


Figure 13. Areas of intervention, strategic objectives and measures included in the Gender Equality Plan 2023-2027 of the SGG

Strategic objectives at national level are integrated and adapted to regional specificities through smart specialization strategies¹⁸. Although not exclusively dedicated to the principle of gender equality, the Smart Specialization Strategies (RIS3) are an essential tool for sustainable regional development, contributing to increasing economic competitiveness by identifying priority areas with high innovation potential. At the regional level, these strategies are based on the analysis of local resources, research and development (RDI) capacities and existing economic competences, with the aim of targeting investments towards sectors with high added value and growth potential. Gender mainstreaming in RIS3 strategies is essential to ensure equitable and inclusive development. This implies identifying and removing barriers that prevent equal access for women and men to the opportunities created by the transition to emerging industries and services.

Although the North-West Region describes a dynamic economic environment and benefits from the presence of prestigious educational centres, **gender disparities are manifested in wage gaps, under-representation of women in managerial positions and limited access to professional opportunities in technical fields**. To address these problems, tailored measures are needed that respond to the economic and cultural specificities of the region. Thus, the [Smart Specialization Strategy 2021-2027](#) of the North-West Development Region recognizes the importance of gender equity for strategic planning, economic development and regional innovation, but in a perspective embedded in the broader context of the importance of social inclusion and education. The main elements mentioned include:

1. *Recognition of gender segregation*: gender inequalities in the labour market and in education are identified, with reference to stereotypical educational choices, as well as the lack of balanced representation in areas with innovation potential (technology, research).
2. *Vocational training*: Initiatives to develop vocational skills are strategically structured for the whole population, without specific measures targeting the female population (25% of participants in vocational training programs are women).
3. *Participation in innovation*: transdisciplinary (*quadruple helix*) collaborations between universities (or research centres), SMEs, society and public authorities are encouraged, with no mention of promoting women in these initiatives.

Therefore, despite the general recognition of gender inequalities, the strategy does not provide specific measures to support the fight against discrimination, with no mention of *dedicated programs* (mentoring, funding or training specifically designed for women entrepreneurs), *support initiatives for female start-ups* (no aim to facilitate women's access to entrepreneurial resources and opportunities), *access to finance* (no financial facilities dedicated to women entrepreneurs are planned, thus limiting their ability to start and develop businesses).

However, *support programs for SMEs, initiatives for innovation and technology transfer* as well as *training in technological fields* are proposals in the field of entrepreneurship and innovation that are included in the regional strategy and are a good starting point towards a balanced regional development with equitable potential once the gender equity perspective is included. For example, the **Värmland Region** in Sweden includes in its smart specialization

¹⁸ Details on the role of RIS3 can be found in the European Commission's explanatory document [The Role of Smart Specialization in the EU Research and Innovation Policy Landscape](#).

strategy¹⁹ dedicated measures to support female entrepreneurship and leadership in an integrated approach. Although they do not include specific components for female entrepreneurship, the **Regions of Navarra**²⁰ (Spain) and **Grand Est**²¹ (France) promote social inclusion and equity in vocational training. Recognition of the importance of diversity (for equitable development and to increase the level of innovation at regional level) is found in the strategies of the **Baden-Württemberg**²² (Germany) and **Pomerania**²³ (Poland) regions, but also without the implementation of specific measures dedicated to women (Fig. 14).

Smart Specialization Strategies at European level generally aim at a balanced, strategic development with a focus on innovation, diversity and socio-economic balance. However, many of these strategic documents (including the one for the North-West Region of Romania) integrate the gender equality perspective at a general level, without including concrete measures to combat discrimination, reduce gender stereotypes and support professional development for the female population, with women still having much lower percentages in entrepreneurship, leadership or management positions. However, examples of good practice (such as Sweden) can be used as a benchmark for developing and adapting existing strategies to give a clearer picture of the level of gender inequality at regional level and the measures needed to combat it.

¹⁹ *Värmland* Region (Sweden) Smart Specialization Strategy can be found here: [RIS3 Priorities](#)

²⁰ Intelligent Specialization Strategy of the Region of *Navarra* (France) can be consulted here: [Navarra](#)

²¹ The Smart Specialization Strategy of the *Grand Est* Region (France) can be consulted here: [Region Grand](#)

[Est](#)

²² The Smart Specialization Strategy of the Region *Baden-Württemberg* (Germany) can be found here: [Innovationsstrategie Baden-Wurttemberg](#)

²³ Smart Specialization Strategy of the *Pomeranian* Region (Poland) can be found here: [Pomorskie 2030](#)

REGION	ENTREPRENEURSHIP	WORKING ENVIRONMENT	GOOD PRACTICES
Värmland (Sweden)	Explicit gender mainstreaming in entrepreneurial decisions, support for women entrepreneurs and combating gender segregation. Over 50 documented initiatives to support female entrepreneurship. ✓	Combating gender segregation in education and work, promoting female leadership. 45% of vocational programs include gender targets. ✓	Gender mainstreaming in all entrepreneurial and professional decisions and initiatives.
Navarra (Spain)	Measures to reduce female and youth unemployment without clear initiatives for female entrepreneurship. Around 30% of entrepreneurial initiatives target women. ✓	Inclusivity in training and reducing youth unemployment. 35% of training initiatives target gender equity. ✓	Focus on reducing female unemployment and fair training for young people.
Baden-Württemberg (Germany)	General references to diversity and inclusion without concrete measures for female entrepreneurship. ✗	Promoting diversity in technology and innovation. Women represent only 20% of the tech sector. ✓	Overall promotion of diversity in innovation and technology.
Grand Est (France)	General advancement of equity in business and education. ✗	Equal opportunities in vocational training. Women occupy 30% of management positions. ✓	Equal opportunities in education and training.
Emilia-Romagna (Italy)	Participation of women and young people in innovation processes. Only 25% of the initiatives include women. ✓	Involving women in the digital transition. Around 40% of initiatives target equity in education and training. ✓	Involving women and young people in innovation and digitalization processes.
Nord-West (Romania)	Identifying gender issues in the labor market. The proportion of women entrepreneurs is 20%. ✗	Combating gender segregation in education and the labor market. Women represent 25% of employees in technology sectors. ✓	Identifying gender issues in education and work without concrete measures.
Pomerania (Poland)	Focus on future skills and talent attraction. ✓	General vocational training without detailed gender measures. Only 18% of training programs include gender objectives. ✗	Focus on future skills and talent attraction.

Figure 14. Comparative analysis of RIS3 in DEBUTING partner regions on measures included in entrepreneurship and professional environment to ensure gender equality

3.4. *Good practices in implementing gender equality in the socio-economic environment*

The top-down approaches presented in the previous chapters can be coupled with bottom-up approaches to promote gender equality in the socio-economic environment. Such approaches are considered as benchmark *good practices*. The DEBUTING project promotes the good practices identified in the European partner regions with the aim to (1) quantify them and (2) replicate them across the European space. So far, **more than 50 examples of good practices** have been identified within the project. Most of them refer to good practices in *knowledge transfer* (in promoting and implementing the principles of gender equality), **business/entrepreneurship** (by promoting and supporting women's entrepreneurial initiatives) and *IT and technology* (by developing mentoring and training programs for young women interested in developing technical and digital skills) (Fig. 15).

At the level of the North-West Region, 4 such good practices have been identified (so far), centred on promoting female entrepreneurship and creating networks that support sustainable collaboration at regional level.

The North Transylvania Cluster Consortium (TCIC) is an example of **cross-sectoral collaboration** and a best practice model in promoting gender equality and SME competitiveness in the North-West Region of Romania. Initiated in 2016 and formalized in 2022 in the form of the NGO *SMART TRANSYLVANIA Association*, the consortium brings together six sectoral clusters: the *Transylvanian Furniture Cluster*, the *Transylvanian IT Cluster*, the *AgroTransylvania Cluster*, the *Transylvania Energy Cluster*, the *Transylvania Creative Industries Cluster* and the *Romanian New Materials Cluster*. In a context where Romania does not have a national cluster policy, TCIC emerged as a response to the need to strengthen the regional innovation and economic development ecosystem. The consortium aims to support SMEs by **increasing their competitiveness, innovation** and internationalization, **promoting gender equality in leadership positions** and creating a **collaborative culture** based on inclusion and diversity.

TCIC operates as an **integrated ecosystem**, carrying out joint activities that include lobbying for public policies, development of shared infrastructures and resources, as well as implementation of regional and European projects. The main beneficiaries are member companies, universities, research institutions and public authorities. The consortium is also actively involved in regional policy consultation and monitoring processes, being represented in the *Monitoring Committee of the North-West Regional Program 2021-2027*. A distinctive element of TCIC is the **promotion of female leadership**, reflected in the fact that half of the member clusters are led by female managers. This approach has helped to **build a strong image of women in the region's entrepreneurial ecosystem**, emphasizing their active role in innovation and strategic decision-making. The model promoted by TCIC demonstrates how collaborative practices can support the implementation of gender equality policies in both the private and public sectors.

The Women Entrepreneur Program, run at national level by the Ministry of Economy, Digitalization, Entrepreneurship and Tourism and implemented through territorial offices in the development regions, is an outstanding example of supporting gender equality and sustainable business development, targeting women who own or manage businesses. Implemented (also) in the North-West Region of Romania, the initiative aims to **reduce gender bias** and **support female**

entrepreneurship through access to financial resources, training and mentoring. With an impressive budget of €44 million for the 2022 and 2024 editions, funding for a project is a maximum of €40,000, which covers 95% of eligible expenses, such as the purchase of technological equipment, workspaces, intensive courses and digital packages. Through a pilot edition held in Cluj-Napoca, free coaching sessions were offered to a total of 23 women entrepreneurs who received support from 18 coaches, summing up to 97 hours of mentoring, supporting the development of an inclusive local economy and reducing gender barriers in entrepreneurship.

The program contributes to **women's work-life balance** by recognizing the unique challenges they face. It also supports the **integration of women into business networks** and **promotes collaboration between the public and private sector to reduce gender inequality**. The implementation of the program has generated a significant impact on the entrepreneurial community in the North-West Region. **The increase in the number of businesses run by women** and the **development of support networks** demonstrate the success of this model. The pro bono coaching provided by the Cluj SME Agency has contributed to the **development of leadership skills** and the **creation of an inclusive business environment**, facilitating the creation of new jobs and supporting regional economic growth.

[The Business Women's Association of Cluj-Napoca](#) (AFA Cluj), represents an outstanding practice of promoting gender equality and supporting female entrepreneurship in the North-West Region of Romania. Founded 20 years ago, AFA is a voluntary organization made up of **50 businesswomen** who are actively involved in initiatives aimed at supporting social inclusion, education, health and community development. AFA Cluj achieves its goals by organizing networking events, community projects and educational initiatives.

For example, *Project SHEInspire* brings together established and aspiring female entrepreneurs to share success stories and inspire new generations of leaders. *Romania InfoPoint* is a government-funded platform providing essential information on business regulations, funding opportunities and the labour market for the Romanian diaspora. *CuGet Competition* is also an initiative for young people aged 14-25 that encourages them to explore entrepreneurship and develop their personal skills. In order to promote and sustainably integrate female entrepreneurship, AFA Cluj organizes the annual *Female Excellence Ball*, an event designed to commend women's achievements and promote the recognition of their contributions at community level. Through these events, the organization highlights women's achievements and encourages the community to **recognize their important role in the economy**, while education and training initiatives for young people support **equal opportunities from the very beginning of their careers**, contributing to a long-term **change in mentalities**.

Over the years, AFA Cluj has had a significant impact on the regional community. Annually, **over 100 women entrepreneurs** are mentored through the *SHEInspire* project and **more than 1,000 young people** have been involved in the *CuGet competition*. Each year, over 60 participants are also honoured at the *Female Excellence Ball*. Through such innovative and community-oriented activities, the organization has created a replicable model for other regions interested in reducing gender inequality and supporting female entrepreneurship.

[The Mamprenoare Association](#), initiated in Cluj-Napoca, is a best practice in promoting gender equality and supporting female entrepreneurship, especially for mothers who want to

develop their own businesses. The initiative addresses the unique problems faced by women in Romania, such as the difficulty of balancing professional ambitions with family responsibilities and the lack of dedicated support networks. Through an integrated approach, the association offers structured support through local communities, flexible educational programs, personalized mentoring and advocacy activities. Its good practice status derives from its innovative and inclusive nature. The association combines the creation of strong offline and online support networks with hands-on training in marketing, sales, financial management and leadership, actively collaborating with government organizations, NGOs and private companies to influence public policy and expand the resources available to its members. In addition, its adaptable structure, which takes into account the needs of mothers through flexible events and attention to work-life balance, ensures a significant impact on the lives of beneficiaries and the local economy. This initiative demonstrates how a well-organized community based on mentoring and networking can overcome cultural and financial barriers to support women in entrepreneurship.

The implementation and promotion of such good practices (such as those identified in the North-West Region) bring a significant regional benefit. Increasing their visibility is an extremely useful measure to highlight the advantages of gender equality in the socio-economic environment and to provide the young population (especially women) with successful examples of how to enter the entrepreneurial environment. Good practices that contribute to the equitable development of girls'/women's technical and digital skills also contribute to the formation of a segment in the labour market that companies in emerging fields can benefit from by expanding the recruitment pool.

PARTNER REGIONS - DEBUTING PROJECT

GOOD PRACTICES IN IMPLEMENTING GENDER EQUALITY

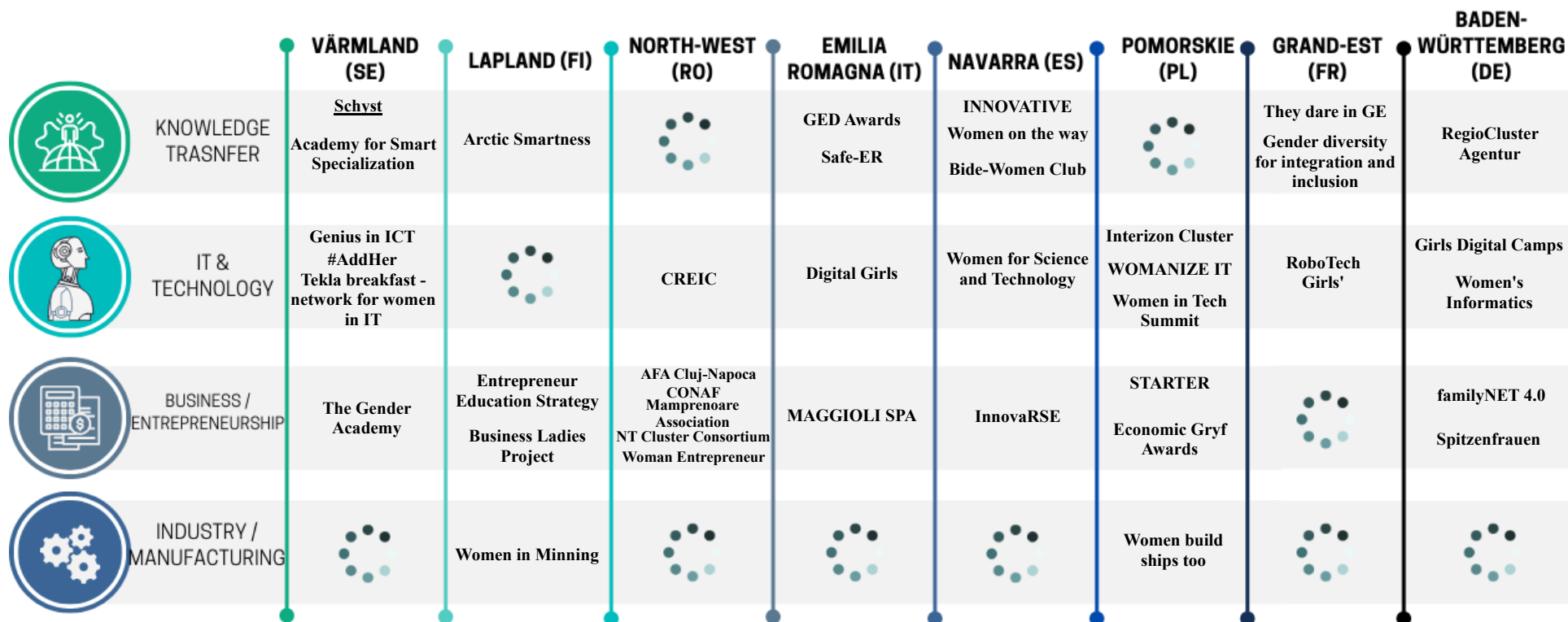


Figure 15. Comparative analysis of good practices in DEBUTING partner regions, by target areas

4. Measures proposed to implement gender equality in the North-West Region

The implementation of gender equality in the North-West Region cannot (only) be analysed in isolation, but has to be seen in the broader context of national policies and initiatives. The evolution of the legislative framework, governmental strategies and measures adopted at national level directly influence the opportunities and challenges at regional level.

Therefore, in order to identify measures that are effective and applicable in the North-West Region, an assessment that takes into account both progress and bottlenecks at national level is essential, thus ensuring a coherent and sustainable approach. This chapter presents the strengths and weaknesses of gender mainstreaming at national level on the basis of which the advantages



and disadvantages of gender mainstreaming at regional level are then analysed. The proposed measures and instruments are customized according to the elements identified in the two scales of analysis so that they respond to the specific socio-economic and cultural context of the region.

Romania has a solid legislative framework in the field of gender equality, in line with international and European standards, which creates the necessary prerequisites for the implementation of effective policies at regional level. The existence of dedicated institutions, such as CONES, COJES and ANES, contributes to the development of national strategies and their implementation on the ground, facilitating the coordination of regional initiatives

In the private sector, legislation sanctions gender discrimination and provides mechanisms for pay equity and work-life balance. These regulations create a favourable framework for integrating gender equality measures into regional economic development strategies,

Figure 16. SWOT analysis of the implementation of gender equality at national level, with impact at regional level

providing opportunities to promote an inclusive and fair work environment.

Introducing gender equality into educational and social policies also supports long-term changes in mentalities and has a direct impact at regional level by reducing stereotypes and raising awareness. The implementation of good practices at local level, supported by a supportive legislative framework, can accelerate progress in the field of equal opportunities, contributing to balanced economic and social development in all regions of the country.

However, despite the well-defined legislative framework, the effective implementation of gender equality policies faces significant difficulties at national level, with a direct impact on regional progress. One of the main obstacles is the poor implementation of existing legislation, in particular due to the lack of effective coordination and monitoring of the targets set in the national strategies. The responsible bodies, such as COJES, fail to implement concrete measures in a systematic way, which leads to discrepancies in the application of gender equality principles between different regions of the country.

Another problematic aspect is the fragmented approach to gender equality, which is present only punctually in some laws, without a coherent strategy for gender mainstreaming in all areas of public policy. The lack of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms means that reporting is often a mere formality, with no relevant analytical content. For example, insufficient and uneven collection of data disaggregated by gender is a major barrier. The lack of clear indicators to monitor the progress and impact of implemented measures makes it difficult to base decisions on hard data. This affects regions by making it impossible to adapt policies to the local context and the real needs of the population, perpetuating existing inequalities.

Economically, gender equality is affected by the lack of public policies dedicated to women's economic empowerment. There are no clear legislative provisions on women's access to finance, credit or special economic programs, limiting their entrepreneurial and professional development opportunities. At the regional level, these shortcomings lead to the perpetuation of occupational segregation and under-representation of women in leadership positions. Also, although the legislation provides for equal pay for equal work, there is a lack of monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms to ensure that this principle is effectively enforced. This, coupled with a predominantly male-dominated organizational culture in the private and public sector, the persistence of gender stereotypes in career development and indirect discrimination, limits women's opportunities for career advancement and contributes to the persistence of pay disparities.

In terms of work-life balance, existing policies are not sufficiently promoted or utilized. Childcare leave, flexible working arrangements or paternity leave are poorly used options due to socio-cultural norms and lack of support measures. In many regions, the infrastructure for childcare and care for dependent persons is underdeveloped, which particularly affects women, limiting their employment and professional development opportunities.

Although Romania has a solid legislative framework and has made progress in the field of gender equality, the concrete implementation of these measures remains insufficient, which affects regional development and perpetuates existing inequalities. The lack of effective monitoring mechanisms, coupled with difficulties in the collection and use of gender data, hinders the identification of region-specific problems and the development of tailored public policies. In addition, the fragmented approach to gender equality and the lack of an intersectional perspective

reduces the effectiveness of anti-discrimination strategies, particularly affecting vulnerable groups. Work-life balance policies are also not widely used, which contributes to maintaining inequalities in the labour market. Thus, without integrated measures linking legislation with practical initiatives at local and regional level, progress in reducing gender disparities will remain limited, underlining the need for concrete action to ensure effective and sustainable implementation of gender equality principles.

However, Romania has a number of opportunities that can accelerate progress at both national and regional level. Access to European and international funds allows the development of support programs for female entrepreneurship and gender mainstreaming in local economic strategies. Increased public and institutional interest in the issue can stimulate more effective policies, while digitization and the development of technological skills offer the chance to reduce gender disparities in emerging sectors. Promoting gender equality education in schools and universities also helps to change mentalities and combat stereotypes that perpetuate occupational segregation.

However, these opportunities are counterbalanced by a number of threats that may limit the positive impact of the measures adopted. The persistence of socio-cultural resistance to change, fuelled by traditional mentalities, remains a major obstacle to the effective implementation of gender equality policies. Lack of political will and under-funding of dedicated programmes can slow the pace of progress, and economic and social crises risk prioritizing other areas at the expense of equity and inclusion measures. In addition, indirect discrimination persists in the workplace, where informal rules and the lack of effective monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms maintain gender disparities, disproportionately affecting women in less developed regions.

4.1. Opportunities and threats in the regional implementation of gender equality

The elements described in the SWOT analysis at national level are echoed at regional level, where the implementation of national strategies depends on the capacity of local authorities to mainstream gender in economic and social development policies. In regions with limited administrative resources, the lack of coherent and integrated public policies can reduce the effectiveness of measures, maintaining structural inequalities. Also, the under-utilization of existing mechanisms, such as paternity leave or flexible working hours, limits the potential impact of these measures on work-life balance.

For opportunities to be realized to their full potential, a strategic approach combining strong legislative measures, adequate budgetary allocations and awareness-raising campaigns to change mindsets is needed. Mainstreaming gender equality into regional economic development strategies and close collaboration between the public sector, the private sector and civil society can help reduce disparities and create a more equitable and inclusive socio-economic environment.

The North-West region benefits from a high level of local development, reflected in a low school drop-out rate, a high average income and a low poverty and unemployment rate. This favourable economic context supports the growth of a climate conducive to gender equality initiatives, thus facilitating the integration of women in emerging sectors such as IT and industry. Prestigious academic and industrial centres in the region also play a key role in developing human

resources and promoting inclusive work environments. These aspects are also supported by the regional operational programs, which indirectly contribute to increasing women's access and retention in various professional fields. In addition, the region's Smart Specialization Strategy recognizes gender segregation in education and the economy, which can be an important starting point for the implementation of more inclusive regional policies. At the same time, the Regional Development Plan places a strong emphasis on gender equality, treating it as an essential component of social inclusion and integrating sex-disaggregated indicators to monitor progress.

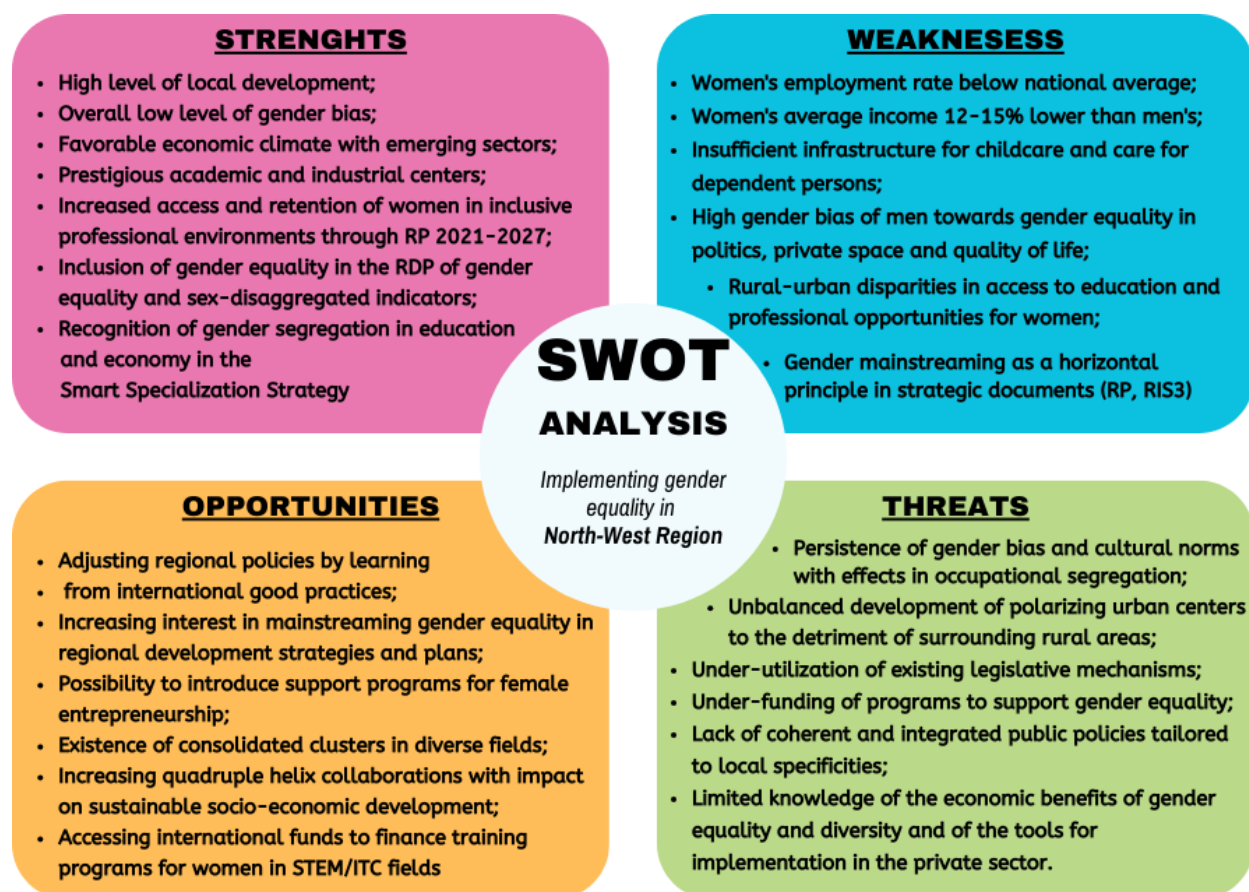


Figure 17. SWOT analysis of gender equality implementation in the North-West Region

Despite the progress made, the region faces a number of weaknesses that affect the effective implementation of gender equality measures. The employment rate of women in the region is below the national average and the pay gap is significant, with women earning on average 12-15% less than men for the same type of work. Also, insufficient infrastructure for childcare and dependent care services is a major barrier to women's labour market participation, especially in rural areas. Significant disparities between rural and urban areas in terms of access to education and professional opportunities for women deepen these inequalities.

Two key strengths are coupled with disadvantages: (1) *gender mainstreaming in strategic documents* and (2) *the level of gender bias towards women's socio-economic empowerment*. Thus, gender equality is integrated as a horizontal or transversal principle in regional strategic and

development documents (RP, RDP, RIS3). The RP does not include specific guidelines to combat gender inequality, and the measures and policies included imply the promotion of equality implicitly rather than explicitly, with gaps in the monitoring and impact of gender equality measures. Also, the RIS3 of the North-West Region addresses gender equality in the broad context of social inclusion and education, integrating initiatives for the development of professional skills addressed to the whole population, without gender considerations. Consequently, only 25% of the participants in these programs are women. The strategy does not mention specific measures to combat discrimination, initiatives to support female start-ups and financial facilities for women entrepreneurs are missing. The mainstreaming of equality at a general level in the strategy, together with the lack of concrete measures and mechanisms to promote women in the context of quadruple helix collaborations, are aspects that can be turned into advantages or strengths at regional level.

The second strength coupled with disadvantages at the regional level is the gender bias towards socio-economic independence of the female population. The beneficial perspective highlights an *overall* low level of gender bias in the region. However, the analysis of gender bias, disaggregated by sex, highlights the perpetuation of gender bias among the *male population*, particularly with regard to women's involvement in politics and private activities. This psycho-cultural aspect may limit progress in gender equality.

On the other hand, the region benefits from a number of significant opportunities to improve the gender equality situation. By learning from international good practices and integrating these lessons into regional policies, the region can adopt innovative measures to support female entrepreneurship. Increasing interest in mainstreaming gender equality in regional development strategies and plans is another enabling factor, and strengthened clusters in various fields can support the sustainable professional development of women. Quadruple helix collaborations between universities, public authorities, industry and civil society have a positive impact on sustainable socio-economic development and can contribute to reducing gender disparities. Accessing international funding for STEM and RDI training programs for women is also an important opportunity to increase women's participation in these emerging sectors.

In terms of threats, gender biases and cultural norms that favour occupational segregation persist, particularly in rural areas and in innovative technology and managerial/leadership sectors. There is also a risk of unbalanced development of polarizing urban centres to the detriment of bordering rural areas, which may deepen existing inequalities. Under-utilization of existing legislative mechanisms at national level and under-funding of programmes supporting gender equality are other major challenges. In addition, the lack of coherent and integrated public policies tailored to local specificities may compromise the region's progress in promoting gender equality. Beyond these issues, perhaps the greatest threat is the limited knowledge of the economic benefits of gender equality and diversity, as well as of the tools for implementation in the private sector. Thus, gender equality is treated as an issue specific only to the female population, thus neglecting the economic and social benefits derived from better implementation of the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion in professional environments.

4.2. Proposed measures and instruments to implement gender equality in the regional context

The North-West region is in a continuous process of economic and social development, with a favourable climate for innovation and inclusion. However, significant gender inequalities persist, manifested in wage gaps, the under-representation of women in managerial positions and barriers in access to economic and educational resources. In order to turn these challenges into opportunities, a strategic approach, tailored to regional specificities, is needed, including concrete measures at the level of strategic documents, economic and educational structures.

For more effective gender mainstreaming, *regional development plans* should include **a more detailed implementation of measures aimed at reducing gender gaps** in employment, education and access to economic resources. In this respect, it is essential to introduce **monitoring mechanisms based on gender-specific indicators** to measure the impact of regional policies. It is also recommended that regular training be organized for the management structures of business associations in the region in order to ensure a more equitable decision-making structure.

Figure 18. Roadmap for mainstreaming gender equality in regional/cluster development strategies and plans



The Smart Specialization Strategy needs to be tailored to provide tailor-made measures, responding to the economic and cultural specificities of the region. The model of Värmland (Sweden) provides an example of good practice by integrating support programs for women entrepreneurs with an integrated approach linking public initiatives with the private sector. The North-West Region could thus take up this direction, financially supporting start-ups founded by women and promoting women in leadership positions in emerging fields such as IT and creative industries. At the same time, existing strategies need to be revised to include measures tailored to local specificities, taking into account the inequalities existing in each county of the region.

In order to achieve the policy mix objective of RIS3²⁴, it is essential that public and private actors in the North-West Region **integrate the gender dimension in the innovation and**

²⁴ The objective of the policy mix as presented in the RIS3 document is: "Supporting innovation in areas of smart specialization through concrete actions, arising from identified barriers and challenges, for the structural transformation of the regional economy"

development process. Innovation means generating new products and services that respond to market needs. The market is made up of consumers, men and women, whose needs are often treated equally, although they have a strong gender component. Therefore, innovation derived from a gender equality perspective involves integrating gender and intersectional analysis into the creative process in order to generate solutions that promote equity, rather than accentuate existing inequalities. Gender-sensitive innovation brings with it benefits for society (inclusiveness, equity) as well as for the economy (increased profits from RDI activities, high competitiveness, strong brand with high potential to attract young workforce).

Clusters in the region can play a key role in facilitating knowledge transfer and supporting SMEs in adopting inclusive practices. In this respect, the following proposed measures can be implemented:

- *Promote good practices* at regional level to highlight the economic benefits of gender diversity. This would help combat stereotypes about women's skills and reinforce the idea that gender equality is not only a social issue but also an economic opportunity;
- *Digital tools to streamline communication and planning* in SMEs, thus reducing administrative barriers that discourage the hiring and promotion of women;
- *Re-assess recruitment and promotion processes* to ensure equitable access to management positions. This can be supported by the introduction of clear gender diversity standards at managerial level.
- *Create partnerships between clusters, universities and the private sector* to develop mentoring and training programs dedicated to women, especially in STEM fields where their representation is low.

Clusters can therefore support SMEs in the region through knowledge transfer mechanisms, innovative collaborative opportunities, mentoring programs and campaigns to promote the benefits of gender equality.

Education and training are essential tools for reducing gender disparities and increasing women's access to professional opportunities. To this end, gender equality education programs can be introduced in schools and universities to combat prejudices and encourage girls' participation in technical and entrepreneurial fields. The development of vocational training and retraining centres for women is particularly needed in rural areas where access to economic opportunities is limited. In addition, expanding the infrastructure of services for childcare and care for dependent persons could facilitate women's active participation in the labour market, together with the promotion of successful female role models through information campaigns and regional events highlighting the role of women in various economic fields.

Mainstreaming gender equality in the North-West Region's development strategies requires a coordinated approach, including both tailored public policies and concrete measures at the level of SMEs and the education system. The revision of strategic documents (RDP, ROP, RIS3) to include clear and measurable objectives, the development of specific initiatives to support women entrepreneurs and the creation of an environment conducive to equal access to economic opportunities are essential steps in this direction. Through collaboration between public authorities, clusters, universities and the private sector, the region can become a successful

example in promoting gender equality, thus contributing to increased economic competitiveness and equitable regional development.

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