



ORIGINAL PAPER

Gender Role Attitudes and Implications on the Ability to Negotiate the Balance between Work and Family Life

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Abstract

Although Romanian women express egalitarian opinions regarding their engagement on labour market and in child caregiving, data show that parenthood has a different impact on women and men's employment. The gender gap in employment increases as the number of children in the family grows. Children's age also has an impact. Thus, the gender gap in employment reduces by almost half for adults with children older than 12 years (13.5 percentage points in Romania in 2014), compared with adults having children younger than 6 years of age (23.2 points percentage). Women continue to assume the bulk of the nurturing and caregiving responsibilities in their household. This article uses a sociological approach regarding the impact of parenthood on employment with special focus on women's gender role attitudes and their implications on the ability to negotiate the balance between work and family life. The paper is based on a quantitative analysis using data from the European Labour Force Survey (EU LFS) completed by qualitative research findings from two focus groups developed in Bucharest among working mothers.

Keywords: *gender role attitudes, work-life balance, gender gap in parental employment, working mothers*

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Introduction

Europe 2020, the European Union's ten-year economic growth Strategy, was launched in 2010 aiming to create the conditions for *smart* (through more effective investments in education, research and innovation), *sustainable* (through a move towards a low-carbon economy) and *inclusive* (with a strong emphasis on job creation and poverty reduction) *growth*. To measure progress in meeting the Europe 2020 goals, 5 headline targets have been agreed for European Union as a whole, rendered into national targets reflecting the diversity of Member States' situations and circumstances (European Commission, 2010). *Employment* represents one of the 5 objectives for which a target was set: 75% of the 20-64 year-olds to be employed by 2020 in European Union. Given the high gender gap in employment, in order to achieve the EU's target of 75% of men and women in employment in 2020, coordinated efforts are required to close the gender gap and to facilitate women's labour-market participation. Such coordinated efforts involve making it easier to balance caring and professional responsibilities, and also a more equal sharing of time spent on care and household activities (European Commission, 2015).

According to the Romanian target regarding employment, as set out in the National Reform Programme (NRP) in April 2014, 70% of the 20-64 year-olds should be employed by 2020 (Romanian Government, 2015). Romania has one of the lowest targets in EU regarding the employment rate. As an eastern ex-communist European country, Romania experienced a smaller gender employment gap during communism when the State encouraged women's participation on labour market. Yet, the Romanian communist regime enhanced the traditional cultural models regarding gender roles, maintaining hierarchies and gender disparities in society. The post-socialist picture is very different with regards to women's participation on labour market, with ascending trends regarding the gender employment gap, especially after the global economic crisis started in 2008.

The ex and post-communist image of the Romanian society conducts to the idea that the evolution of the gender gap in employment reflects the variety of political and economic factors, but also the influence of socio-cultural factors such as the hegemonic cultural beliefs shaped or enforced by different institutions (Sănduleasa, 2015). Public policies may promote, reproduce or even deepen the traditional cultural model with regards to gender roles, but governments may also decide, at some point, to promote policies aiming to change the cultural model, in which point special attention should be paid on the risk of failure. Studies of public policies' failure typically assess the effectiveness, efficiency, and/or performance, but a special attention should also be paid to the policy legitimacy. Legitimacy refers to the public participation in the implementation of government strategies used for enacting policy change. In light of the need to increase female participation rates on the labour market, housework became an important theme of the academic international studies. Although many scholars argue that the behaviour of women between paid work and family life can be explained by the effects of welfare state policies such as public childcare provision, *cultural values* also contribute to the explanation of the behaviour of women between family and employment, as culture interacts with welfare state policies (Pfau-Effinger, 2004).

Researches show that the division of household labour in the family reproduces gender as a social category (Lewin-Epstein, Stier and Braun 2006; Greenstein, 2000). Ridgeway and Correll (2004) argue that gender is "*an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women,*

and organizing social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference". During social interaction, the category of sex receives social validation, which means that gender is a social phenomenon. So, the fact that individuals categorize themselves as men or women and as similar or different from others with regards to gender is not a natural process, but *socially constructed based on cultural beliefs*. The attitudes and behaviours that society expects men and women to adopt in public and private life are called in sociology *gender roles*. The construction of gender roles is subject to change from one historical period to another and from one society to another, under the influence of economic and political factors. Research studies describe three historical stages regarding the construction of gender roles: *Traditional gender role ideology*: women prioritize their family responsibilities by fulfilling roles as mothers, wives and housewives, while men prioritize work-related responsibilities by acting as the main income earner in the household; *Egalitarian gender role ideology*: values gender roles equally divided between men and women both in the private and the public sphere of life; a family with egalitarian values is the opposite of a family with traditional patriarchal values; *Neotraditional gender role ideology*: coexistence of alternative traditional and egalitarian gender role beliefs; in a Neotraditional family both partners actively participate on the labour market and in activities within the household, but a rather unequal division of labour remains since both spouses are engaged in paid employment, but the majority of unpaid work within the household is carried out by women.

The transition from traditional to the egalitarian gender role attitudes happened faster for women than for men, women being the ones who benefit most from the account of gender equality (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001; Ridgeway, 1997; Ciabattari, 2001). Although women's participation on labour market increased in many societies, this was not translated into greater involvement of men in housework (housekeeping, caring for children). Analysing the division of household tasks and childcare between partners is a good method to measure the egalitarianism of a family, as men usually solve the conflict between work and family responsibilities in favour of the work, while women solve this conflict in favour of the family (Tereškinas, 2010). While in terms of promoting gender equality outside the family it is easier to promote specific measures and policies, the state cannot interfere in the negotiation process of gender roles between the spouses, this being a private matter.

Hegemonic cultural beliefs related to gender roles act as guidelines for the gender system, and the basic structure of these beliefs is not easily eroded despite the changes occurring in terms of socio-economic conditions and despite the promotion of policies supporting gender equality (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). Cultural aspects remain a determining factor in the negotiation of gender roles within the family, but also in the workplace, and in society in general. Under the influence of cultural factors, spouses negotiate the division of domestic labour by adopting one of the following behavioural patterns: *Complementary-traditional gender roles model*: wife participates in a lesser extent in paid economic activities, involving itself more in unpaid activities within the household while the husband is dedicated especially to labour market participation; *Women's "double burden" model*: the wife works to earn money, but she is also responsible for significant amounts of unpaid domestic labour; *Shared gender roles model*: husband and wife equally participate in domestic labour.

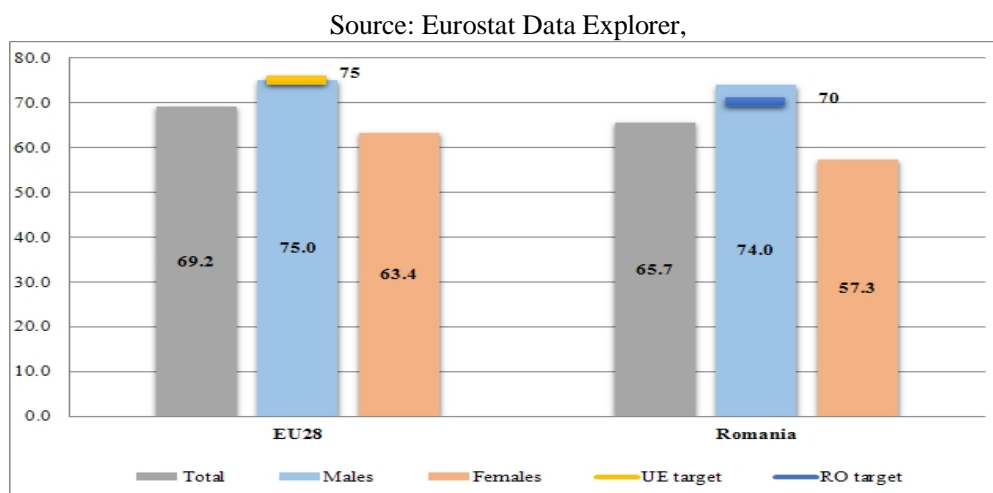
Data and Method

This paper uses analysis of official statistics from the European Labour Force Survey (EU LFS) regarding the impact of parenthood on employment in Romania and at EU28 level. The quantitative data from official statistics are complemented by qualitative data collected through two focus groups developed in Bucharest in 2015 among 16 working married women, with stable jobs (working under a full-time or part-time contract, with at least one year of continuous employment experience) and taking care of at least one dependent person from the family (child or elderly person). Before participating in focus groups, all women were asked to answer to a questionnaire developed on the basis of the index of sex-role orientation (ISRO)*. With the aid of the questionnaire, *traditional/non-traditional attitudes* regarding the gendered division of housework and female participation on labour market were measured. The two focus groups measured *behaviours* regarding the implications of gender role attitudes on the ability to negotiate the balance between work and family life, by asking participating women to motivate their answers to the ISRO based questionnaire.

Europe 2020 targets in employment

According to EU LFS, one could say that Romania already met the national target if looking at the employment rate of male population aged 20 to 64 in 2014. Yet, the gender gap in employment is high, thus the total employment rate of population aged 20 to 64 being lowered by the reduced value of the indicator in the case of female population (only 57.3%).

Figure 1. Employment rate (20-64 age group) 2014, Europe 2020 headline target and RO target



online data code: [lfsa_ergan].

Note: Employment rate represents employed persons as a percentage of same age total population.

* The index of sex-role orientation was developed by Dreyer, Woods and James (1981) and consists of 16 attitude statements, each attitude statement accompanied by a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

The impact of parenthood on employment

Female employment rates (FER) generally decrease, while men's increase, as the number of children in family is growing. As a consequence, the gender gap in employment widens significantly as the number of children in family increases. So, parenthood is one of factors underlying the gender employment gap. In 2014, the average gender employment gap in EU28 was of only 1.8 percentage points for childless adults aged between 20 and 49*, as against of 29.8 percentage points for persons with three or more children. In Romania's case, the average gender employment gap was of 8.6 percentage points for childless adults and of 23.3 percentage points for adults with three or more children (Table 1).

Table 1. Female employment rates (FER) and gender employment gap (GEG) by presence of children, age cohort 20-49, EU28 and RO, 2014

	No children		1 child		2 children		3 children or more	
	FER	GEG	FER	GEG	FER	GEG	FER	GEG
EU28	74.9	1.8	70.8	14.2	69.8	19.4	54.8	29.8
Romania	70.1	8.6	71.5	16.1	67.2	20.2	52.9	23.3

Source: Eurostat Data Explorer - Labour Force Survey, online data code: [lfst_hheredch].

Note: Gender employment gap represents percentage point difference between the employment rates for men and for women.

What really increases the gender employment gap is the age of the youngest child. Both in Romania and at EU28 level, the gender gap reduces as the age of the youngest child increases, which means that mothers are still the ones who generally take the leave after a child is born. Still, there are some differences between Romania and the European average. Thus, in the case of adults with the youngest child aged less than 6, the gender employment gap in EU28 is higher as compared to Romania, while in the case of adults with the youngest child aged 12 years or over, the situation reverses (Table 2).

Table 2 - Female employment rates (FER) and gender employment gap (GEG) by the age of youngest child, age cohort 20-49, EU28 and RO, 2014

	Less than 6 years		From 6 to 11 years		12 years or over	
	FER	GEG	FER	GEG	FER	GEG
EU28	61.7	26.5	72.0	16.3	73.9	8.5
Romania	61.8	23.2	67.9	19.3	72.8	13.5

Source: Eurostat Data Explorer - Labour Force Survey, online data code: [lfst_hheredch].

Note: Gender employment gap represents percentage point difference between the employment rates for men and for women.

* The upper limit of 49 years was used for the age cohort, given the fact that conventional international statistical usage for the calculation of fertility rates is the age group 15-49.

Gender Role Attitudes and Implications on the Ability to Negotiate the Balance ...

On the other hand, analysing the gender employment gap in relation to parent's educational level, it is observed the fact that there is a relation between employment, education, parenthood and gender both in Romania and at EU28 level. Gender employment gap reduces in the case of adults with higher education, regardless the age of the youngest child. The highest gender gap in employment is registered in case of adults with low educational levels, regardless the age of the youngest child, both in Romania and at EU28 level (Table 3).

Table 3 - Gender employment gap by parent's educational level and age of youngest child, age cohort 20-49, EU28 and RO, 2014

Age of youngest child	Education	EU28	Romania
Less than 6 years	ISCED 0-2	39	31.5
	ISCED 3-4	30.1	26.6
	ISCED 5-8	17.9	7.8
From 6 to 11 years	ISCED 0-2	27.5	23.6
	ISCED 3-4	16.2	19.3
	ISCED 5-8	9.6	7.5
12 years or over	ISCED 0-2	17.2	19.7
	ISCED 3-4	7.7	13.5
	ISCED 5-8	3.3	2.3

Source: Eurostat Data Explorer - Labour Force Survey, online data code: [lfst_hheredch].

Note: Gender employment gap represents percentage point difference between the employment rates for men and for women.

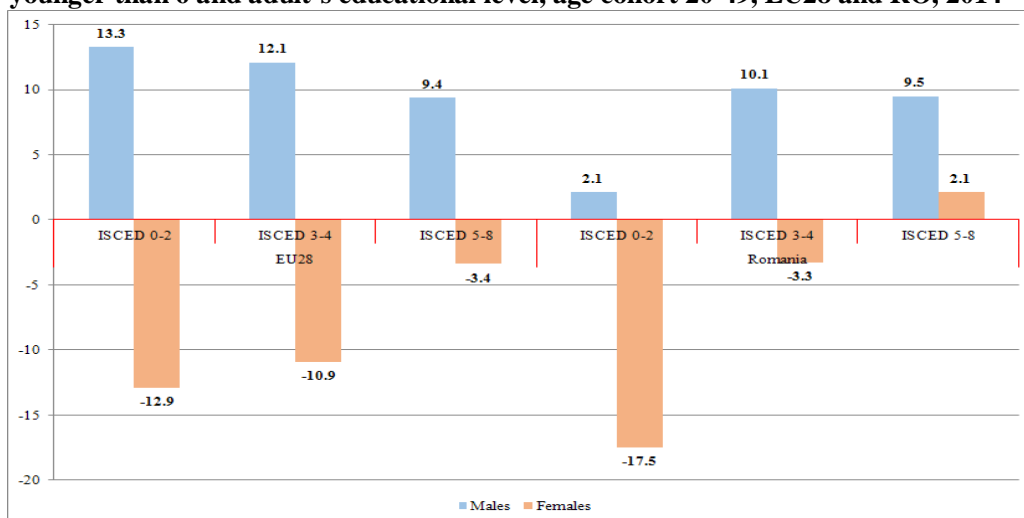
A special attention should be paid to the analysis of the gender gap in employment by comparing the employment rates of adults with and without children, within each gender category separately, women and men respectively.

The presence of a child younger than 6 increases labour market participation of the male population aged between 20 and 49 years old, while the participation of women on labour market is negatively influenced by the presence of a child younger than 6.

In Romania, the employment rate of women with a child younger than 6 was 2,6 percentage points lower than that of women without children, whereas the employment rate of males with a child younger than 6 was 9.4 percentage points higher than that of men without children, in 2014.

When included the level of education into analysis, it is observed that in Romania the participation of women on labour market is negatively influenced by the presence of a child younger than 6 in the case of mothers with lower educational levels (ISCED 0-4), but not in the case of mothers with tertiary education (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Employment gap by gender depending on the presence of a child younger than 6 and adult's educational level, age cohort 20-49, EU28 and RO, 2014



Source: Eurostat Data Explorer - Labour Force Survey, online data code: [lfst_hheredch].

Note: Employment gap represents percentage point difference between the employment rates of the ones without children and the ones with a child under 6 years old, per gender.

Factors generating work-life conflict among families with children

Empirical data from qualitative research conducted by INCSMPS team in 2015 measured behaviours regarding the implications of gender role attitudes on the ability to negotiate the balance between work and family life. As mentioned above, before participating in group discussions, women selected for the qualitative study were asked to answer to a questionnaire containing several attitude statements, each accompanied by a 5-point response scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. During group discussions, women were asked additional opened questions, in order to find out the motivations of their answers to the ISRO based questionnaire and to identify the behavioural patterns with regards to the division of domestic labour and the participation on labour market.

Almost all women strongly disagreed with the statement “*Except in special cases, the wife should do the cooking and house cleaning, and the husband should provide the family with money*”, which means, on one hand, that they support women’s participation on the labour market and, on the other hand, that the husbands should also involve in household chores. Yet, only 56% of the women participating to the study strongly disagreed with the statement “*Women should be concerned with their duties of child rearing and house tending rather than with their careers*”, while 25% of them nor agreed nor disagreed and 19% agreed strongly or partially. Even all of them supported the idea of equality between spouses and said they received help from their husbands with household chores, women participating in the study acknowledged that they are the ones who do most of the housework and, in their family, husband and wife do not equally participate in domestic labour. So, even if they consider themselves as being part of

Gender Role Attitudes and Implications on the Ability to Negotiate the Balance ...

egalitarian families, women participating in group discussions are primarily responsible for the family and home, despite being involved in the paid work also.

According to the subjects of the study, men are less willing to participate in domestic work and women have an important role in changing men's conservative attitudes with regards to gender roles. In the absence of ECEC services (early childhood education and care), the support received from husband is important for the mother when she returns to work from parental leave.

"I cannot say that we share housework equally, but, for example, when I am at work and he is home, he takes care of the children, he goes in park with them. But he doesn't do homework, I am the only one helping children with their homework. The other housework activities we share as much as we can." (F, age 39, secondary education)

"I feel superior for being able to do all these things. [...] If I saw him [the husband] sitting on the chair and not doing anything and not helping me around the house and not getting involved at all, perhaps frustration would appear and I'd say <Man, am I lower or what?>, but as long as he helps me with something around the house..." (F, age 48, higher education)

"After 2 years of staying home [parental leave], it is hard to come back to work. Things have evolved, you have to retrieve and in order to catch up you need your husband's help...you and your husband need to take turns...the effort is huge." (F, age 45, secondary education)

"The wife has a very important role in husband's participation in housework. They [men] never say: <Let me do that!>, it is you [the women] saying <Could you help me with...?>, and he says <Yeah, sure, okay.>I think there are very few men who take the initiative to do domestic work..." (F, age 45, higher education)

"As the woman learns, a man can learn also [to do housework and take care of children]" (F, age 45, secondary education)

Opinions regarding the statement *"I could not respect a man if he decided to stay at home and take care of his children while his wife worked"* were divided between strongly disagreement, nor agreement nor disagreement, and strongly agreement. The same situation was registered with regards to the statement *"I approve of a woman providing the financial support for the family while the husband does the household chores"*. Women participating in the study motivated their opinions by saying that both the husband and wife should have paid jobs, and that they would accept their husbands' decision to stay home and take care of the children and house only temporarily and only if there is a crisis situation within the family that inquires one of the spouses to stay home (for example, the wife earns more money, therefore it is more convenient that the husband stay home so that family's budget be less affected).

"If both spouses agree, and it is for a limited period of time, in certain situations...then there is no question of losing respect..." (F, age 45, higher education)

"I have colleagues who stayed home with their new born children because the wife earned more money at her job" (F, age 48, higher education)

“This is how things are done in Romania, in general. But it doesn’t necessarily have to be like that. Maybe family members could talk and decide that who earns more money goes to work and the other stays home [...]” (F, age 37, secondary education)

Balancing work with family life is not easy for Romanian women, especially when preschool children are involved. Presently, public ECEC services are insufficiently developed in Romania, as the access to these services gradually deteriorated after the fall of communist regime. In big cities, the lack of public services is partially covered by the private sector, but only a small group of parents can afford to pay for private nurseries or kindergartens, or even for a nanny. Most working parents have to find alternative solutions such as asking for grandparents’ help.

“It’s a constant stress. I wake up at 6 in the morning, then run the nursery, go to work, come back from work...” (F, age 35, higher education)
“It was terrible with the nursery. Public nurseries are too few. Private nurseries...you go to work and still don’t have enough money to pay for them...” (F, age 45, secondary education)

Having a part-time job is not an option in Romania, given the low wages relative to daily expenses, especially in the case of families with children. On the other hand, parents hit a wall when trying to negotiate flexible working arrangements with their employers. Women are even more affected by the lack of interest from employers to offer working conditions designed to help people balance work and family life (flexible work schedules, support for breastfeeding in the workplace, etc.). Since they hardly receive support from their husbands or from their employers, women feel that they have to adjust their professional life to their family requirements, thus prioritizing family and not professional life.

“He [employer] called me when the child was 11 months and told me <If you’re not coming back to work on Monday, you are not coming back at all. I know you have the right to stay home, but ...> And I had to go back to work.” (F, age 45, secondary education)
“[Family responsibilities] can be an obstacle because I think the reasoning is: <I do not aspire to a management position because I know that maybe tomorrow one of my family members might get sick and need my help...>” (F, age 48, higher education)

Only one half of women participating in the group discussions agreed with the statement *“A woman should not let bearing and rearing children stand in the way of a career if she wants it”*. On one hand, most women said that it is important for a child to stay close to his mother in his early years, and, on the other hand, respondents said they did not want to be put in the position to choose between career and children, they would like to receive support so that they could take care of family and career as well. Women should learn to better negotiate their working arrangements and fight harder for equal rights, according to one of the participants in group discussions.

“I personally would never have given up. I have 3 children, three boys, and I raised them with difficulty. But I would never have given up my career...even if someone would have paid me 7 times my wage to give up. Because I felt the need for fulfilment and development. I did not want that everything I learned and planted in me since I was little to end in staying home. I wanted to develop myself intellectually, mentally, spiritually.” (F, age 58, higher education)

“From my point of view, we [women] should not give up. As Romanian citizen, I have rights, and you, as employer are obligated, on the territory of the Romanian state, to respect the rules and laws from here. Absolutely!” (F, age 45, higher education)

Conclusions

In the context of Europe 2020 Strategy, Romania is below the national target regarding labour market participation of women and men aged 20 to 64. Although families with both spouses working are widespread in Romania, the gender gap in employment is higher compared to other European countries and women carry the biggest load of housework and childcare.

There is a relation between employment, education, parenthood and gender both in Romania and at EU28 level. In Romania, the gender employment gap is significantly higher in the case of parents with lower educational levels (ISCED 0-2) compared to parents with higher education (ISCED 5-8), especially in the case of adults with preschool children. The gender gap in employment is higher in Romania than the European average also in the case of people without children, meaning that the presence of children is not the only variable influencing women's participation on the labour market in Romania.

Women today perform less housework than previous generations, and men perform more household chores than their predecessors. However, results of the qualitative study confirm that the division of domestic work is still unequal in Romania, although the dual-breadwinner model exists for several decades, intensively promoted by the communist regime. The egalitarian gender role model is the ideal to aspire rather than a tangible practice. The wife continues to be responsible for significant amounts of unpaid domestic labour in Romanian families, but since there is evidence of husbands' participation in childcare and housework, we might argue that, at least in large urban areas where there is the largest share of people with higher education, a new model of family is shaping: the neotraditional family model.

Yet, the Romanian social system is still underdeveloped in terms of finding the best solutions to reconcile work and family life. Cultural values can act as barriers to defining gender roles in the family and in society based on equity, as the distribution of gender roles within the family is invariably reflected outside the family. Since a large share of the Romanian population lives in rural areas (46% according to the 2011 Census), a special attention should be paid to people living in these areas, as they tend to have more conservative beliefs and practices with regards to gender roles.

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