

## STUDENTS' SENSE AND SENSIBILITIES. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF GENDER PERCEPTIONS AT ROMANIA'S LARGEST UNIVERSITY

Alexandra COLUMBAN

Mihail BUSE

Felicia Cornelia MACARIE

### Abstract

Academia is one of the main hubs for promoting gender equality and non-discrimination, yet very few programs in Romania actively tackle the topic. An assessment of students' perceptions is thus necessary in order to identify the level of awareness around gender issues and potential barriers hindering an inclusive academic environment. The present exploratory study aims to fill this gap by providing information on four dimensions of gender equality: attitudes towards gender equality, prevalence of gender stereotypes, gender-based violence and sexual harassment, and gender-based discrimination. The questionnaire was applied online and offline between October 2018 and March 2019 to 275 students enrolled in Bachelor, Master and Doctoral studies at Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca.

The study found that students had a rather high awareness about gender issues in general and held favorable views towards gender equality and its enforcement. However, female students were more prone to stereotype, claiming more traits for themselves, and were more likely than their male counterparts to experience sexual harassment and discrimination regarding professional promotion. A series of implications for practitioners and recommendations are also discussed.

**Keywords:** gender equality, gender stereotypes, violence against women, discrimination, tertiary education, survey research.

**Alexandra COLUMBAN** (corresponding author)

PhD Candidate, Doctoral School of Administration and Public Policy, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences,  
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
Tel.: 0040-746-672.026  
E-mail: alexandra.columban@fspac.ro

**Mihail BUSE**

PhD Candidate, Iuliu Hațieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy,  
Biologist, MEDFUTURE – Research Center for Advanced Medicine, Iuliu Hațieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
E-mail: da.buse@gmail.com

**Felicia Cornelia MACARIE**

Professor, Department of Public Administration and Management, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences,  
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania  
E-mail: macarie@fspac.ro

## **1. Introduction.**

### **Gender in Romanian Academia and at Babeş-Bolyai University**

Gender continues to be a topic of interest in Social Sciences and Academia, particularly in the West, in part due to the advancement of feminism, human rights and democracy. Nevertheless, gender studies remain underdeveloped in Romania and topics related to equality between men and women are often marginalized and approached unsystematically. The current study aims to contribute to academic research in Romania on the topic of gender by analyzing the perceptions of students at Babeş-Bolyai University on four dimensions: attitudes towards gender equality, prevalence of gender stereotypes, gender-based violence, and discrimination.

Babeş-Bolyai University (hereinafter BBU), with its 44,676 students for the academic year 2017-2018 (Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, 2018), is the largest university in Romania according to its student body, as well as the highest-ranking university in the country – among the top 601-700 universities in the world, according to the Shanghai Ranking (Academic Ranking of World Universities, undated). It is composed of 21 faculties, 12 of which have extensions in other cities. The majority of its students, 74%, are enrolled in bachelor studies, while 23.4% are studying for their master's degree and 2.5% are PhD candidates. In terms of its gender structure, 65.5% of its students are female (Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, 2019). These numbers are in line with national statistics which indicate that women, as students, are better represented at all levels of higher education: in 2017, in Romania, 40,627 women and 30,498 men earned a bachelor's degree, 30,067 women and 18,170 men earned a master's degree, and 1,027 women and 861 men earned a Doctorate (EIGE - Eurostat, 2016).

Furthermore, the proportion of female staff has steadily increased in Romanian Academia, from 29.45% in 1975 to 50.02% in 2015 (The World Bank, 2019). Nevertheless, on average, females occupy lower teaching positions than men and their numbers decrease among higher teaching positions: in 2015, 39% of managerial positions were held by women, while in 2013, 30.9% of university professors (the highest rank in Romanian tertiary education) were women (Institute for Educational Sciences, 2015, p. 7). Lower representation of female faculty, as well as increased gender segregation in study fields may negatively impact students', particularly women's, perceived self-competence and career choice (Ülkü-Steiner, Kurtz-Costes and Kinlaw, 2000, p. 297; Kurtz-Costes, Helmke and Ülkü-Steiner, 2006, p. 151).

In addition, gender segregation in higher education remains high and has declined very little across decades: for instance, a cross-sectional study on eight European countries from the 1960s to the 1990s shows that the elevated gender segregation can be explained along the humanities-science divide, as well as the care-technical divide, which together account for more than 90% of gender segregation in the countries under study (Barone, 2011, p. 158). In turn, the choice of fields of study alone may be responsible for 14% of the gender income gap (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2007, p. 13). Although no data was identified for the gender structure across fields of study at BBU, it is reasonable to conclude that similar segregation is present at the institution.

## **2. Legislation and public policies on gender equality in education in Romania**

Nondiscrimination in general and, more specifically, gender-based discrimination in education is prohibited by national legislation in Romania. The National Education Law states that the principles governing primary, secondary, and tertiary education in Romania, as well as life-long learning are ‘the principle of equity – according to which the access to education is carried out without discrimination’ and ‘the principle of ensuring equality of opportunities’ (art. 3, National Education Law no. 1/ 2011). Nondiscrimination in the access to education and professional training is also prohibited by Ordinance no. 137/ 2000 on the prevention and sanctioning of all forms of discrimination (art. 1(2-e-V)), as well as by Law no. 272/ 2004 regarding the protection and promotion of the rights of the child (art. 6(b)).

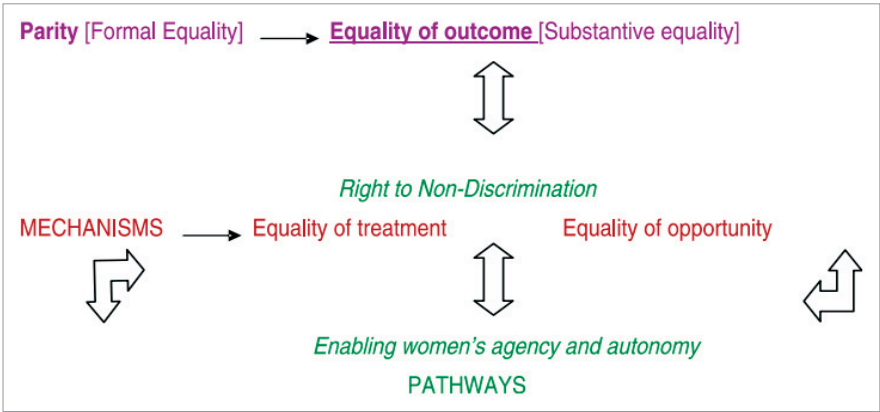
In addition to prohibiting and sanctioning discrimination, a series of legislative acts govern the introduction of educational content promoting gender equality. Concretely, art. 14 (2) of Law no. 202/ 2002 states that ‘educational institutions of all levels, social factors involved in instructional-educational processes, as well as all other providers of training and development services, authorized by law, will include in national education programs themes and activities related to equal opportunities and treatment between women and men’. In addition, the Istanbul Convention (the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence), ratified by Romania in 2016, requires states to ‘take, where appropriate, the necessary steps to include teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners, in formal curricula and at all levels of education’ (art. 14). In fact, Romania committed to similar measures as early as 1981, when it ratified CEDAW (UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women). Article 10 of the Convention states that parties shall take appropriate measures for ‘(c) the elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging coeducation and other types of education which will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programs and the adaptation of teaching methods’.

At the central level, steps towards the implementation of education for gender equality have been taken primarily by ANES (The National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men), an agency under the Ministry of Labor, which has detailed their policies in the National Strategies for the Promotion of Gender Equality 2006-2009, 2010-2012, 2014-2017, and 2018-2021. Some of these measures include: the creation of a guide for gender mainstreaming in preschool education; training programs on gender equality for teachers; and the creation of CONES (The National Commission for Equal Opportunities between Men and Women) which has a consultancy status in national policies concerning education (ANES, n.d., pp. 12-13).

While these actions are encouraging, they remain insufficient, as studies have shown that education for gender equality is systematically marginalized in primary and secondary education, as well as in the teacher training programs (both initial training in universities, aimed at future teachers, and professional training for acting teaching staff) (David, 2020, pp. 48-49).

### 3. Breaking down gender: gender equality, gender stereotypes, violence, and discrimination

There are different approaches to defining and measuring gender equality – one of the four domains investigated in the present study. One such approach distinguishes between gender parity (or formal equality), which measures the access to and participation of men and women in different fields and services, such as education and the labor market, and equality of outcome (or substantive equality), which takes into account the biological differences, as well as the social constructs that disadvantage women in relation to men, thus focusing on the quality of the educational or work experience – i.e. that women enter, take part and benefit from the experience as much as men (Figure 1). While the former is a static indicator, the latter is dynamic and stems from equality of treatment and equality of opportunity, mechanisms which rely on the principle of non-discrimination (Subrahmanian, 2005, pp. 397-398).



**Figure 1:** Mapping the conceptual terrain of gender parity and gender equality

**Source:** Subrahmanian (2005, p. 398)

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, which designed the Gender Equality Index, a comprehensive measure of gender equality understood as gender parity, Romania was the third least equal EU country in 2017 (based on data from 2015), followed only by Hungary and Greece. With an index of 52.4 (where 0 marks complete inequality and 100, perfect equality), Romania is well behind the EU average of 66.2. The index considers six core domains (work, money, time, knowledge, health, and power), as well as two satellite domains (violence against women and

intersecting inequalities). The domain knowledge, of interest for the current study, places Romania at a score of 51.8: although the number of men and women graduates of tertiary education is equal (with more women than men graduates in the 25-49 age group), these are the lowest level in the whole of the EU. In addition, gender segregation in study fields remains high: 31% of women university students, compared to 17% of men students, are enrolled in education, health and welfare, humanities and arts, fields that traditionally perceived as 'feminine' (EIGE – Gender Equality Index, 2018).

Although more difficult to measure and with a less clear connection to gender equality than the aforementioned factors, gender stereotypes may also constitute the cause or the effect of prevailing inequalities. A stereotype is a generalized view or belief about attributes or characteristics that are or should be possessed, as well as the roles that should be performed by members of certain social groups (Cook and Cusack, 2010, p. 9). Consequently, a gender stereotype is a belief or preconception about the attributes, characteristics and roles of women and men (Cook and Cusack, 2010, p. 20). In other words, gender stereotypes are both descriptive and prescriptive, implying a risk of some form of sanction in case of failure to conform, which can range from mild (such as loss of popularity) to severe (social and/ or sexual undesirability or ostracism).

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) draws attention to the harmful effects of gender stereotyping in its extreme forms: 'Wrongful gender stereotyping is a pervasive human rights violation. [...] it is a frequent cause of discrimination against women and a contributing factor in violations of rights ranging from the right to an adequate standard of living through to the freedom from gender-based violence' (OHCHR, 2013). Although gender stereotyping may be a source for human rights violations, there is need for a more nuanced debate around the issue, as research has also indicated that certain stereotyping may also have positive effects on the individual on the receiving end. Research has showed that women who believed that male opponents were highly prejudiced against them evaluated themselves more favorably on positive traits generally associated to women (warmth and care), suggesting an enhanced ingroup identification (Dion, 2002, p. 1).

With regard to the social arenas where Romanians believe gender stereotypes are most prevalent, almost half (46.9%) indicate the workplace, followed by politics (selected by 33.2% of respondents), media (24.1%) and schools (17.6%), while 6.8% of respondents do not believe that gender stereotypes exist (EIGE – Eurobarometer, 2014).

Another dimension of gender equality analyzed in the current study is violence against women, more specifically perceptions about the relationship between gender equality and domestic violence, and occurrence of harassment at the work place. Worldwide, in 2012, one of every two women who was murdered died at the hands of her partner or a family member, while only one in 20 men died in similar circumstance (UN Women, 2018), showing a clear gendered effect of domestic violence. According to an EU-wide survey, 28.5% of Romanian women are victims of physical and/ or sexual violence at one point in their lives after the age of 15 (EU Agency for

Fundamental Rights, 2014, p. 172) and the overwhelming majority of violent incidents are not reported: on average, only 14% of European women reported their most serious incident of intimate partner violence to the police, and 13% reported their most serious incident of non-partner violence to the police (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014, p. 3). Stereotypes in this case may play a role: for instance, in a national 2013 survey, 30.9% of Romanian respondents indicated that 'it is also women's fault when they are beaten' (INSCOP, 2013). In addition, Romanians seem to be tolerant toward sexual violence: 55% of Romanians, the highest number in the EU (the average being 27%), believe that rape is sometimes justifiable, i.e. that sexual intercourse without consent is acceptable in certain situations, such as the victim being drunk, having multiple sexual partners or wearing revealing clothes (Eurobarometer 449, 2016, p. 65).

Statistics about sexual harassment are less grim: 32% of Romanian women admit to having experienced sexual harassment since the age of 15, placing the country on the second to last position in the EU. At the opposite end, 81% Swedish women indicate they have been victims of sexual harassment (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014, p. 99), which could indicate differences in awareness, rather than in the magnitude of the phenomenon. In addition, it is clear that women who have completed higher levels of education are more prone to experiencing sexual harassment than women who have not: 40% of Romanian women with tertiary education have been sexually harassed (as opposed to 32% of all women) (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014, p. 110). With regard to the perpetrator, 32% of European women indicated somebody from the employment context – such as a colleague, a boss or a customer – as having harassed them, placing the issue in a work context.

Another factor that relates to gender equality which the present study analyses is discrimination. An analysis of perception around gender-based discrimination showed that, in 2015, 37.9% of Romanians believed discrimination was very and fairly widespread, compared to 25% in 2012 (Eurobarometer 393, 2012, p. 34), 46.1% that it was a rare occurrence (compared to 47% in 2012), and 9% that it was inexistent (in contrast with 13% in 2012). With regard to personal experiences of discrimination, 3.4% of Romanian women and 2.1% of men felt discriminated against or harassed in the last 12 months, as opposed to, for instance, 18.3% of Swedish women and 3.2% of Swedish men (EIGE – Eurobarometer, 2015).

Studying perceptions about gender equality, including discrimination and violence against women, is relevant as, for instance, exposure to (perceived) discrimination and sexual harassment during university studies influenced the students' future choices, making it more likely for them to perpetuate these behaviors later on (Stratton *et al.*, 2005, pp. 400-408). Analyzing perceptions may also help stakeholders map and identify existing problems and create corresponding strategies to tackle them.



## 4. Methods

### 4.1. *Participants and procedures*

In order to assess perceptions about gender equality among students of BBU, the authors devised a questionnaire, which aimed to evaluate the following four dimensions: (1) gender equality (as perceived at a national level compared to the university level); (2) prevalence of gender stereotypes (in relation to characteristics associated to personal and professional life); (3) gender-based violence and sexual harassment, and (4) exposure to or experience of discrimination. The questionnaire was applied between October 2018 and March 2019 to students of BBU, at bachelor, master and doctoral level, both by distributing printed copies of the questionnaire and by creating an online version of it. The questionnaire was composed of 15 questions, of which 7 assessed gender perceptions, each with sub-items ranging from 1 to 28 (Q1-1, Q2-1, Q3-7, Q4-28, Q5-10, Q6-6, Q7-3) and 8 questions related to demographical information. All 7 questions related to gender perception and their sub-items were five-level Likert items, assessing agreement to certain statements, frequency of event occurrence and the degree to which a trait is deemed more typically male or female.

A total of 305 questionnaires were received, of which 275 were deemed valid after applying the exclusion criteria. The questionnaire responses that were excluded were those that did not indicate the name of the university they were enrolled in or indicated a university other than BBU; those that offered inconsistent or contradictory answers, etc.

### 4.2. *Results*

#### 4.2.1. *Demographics*

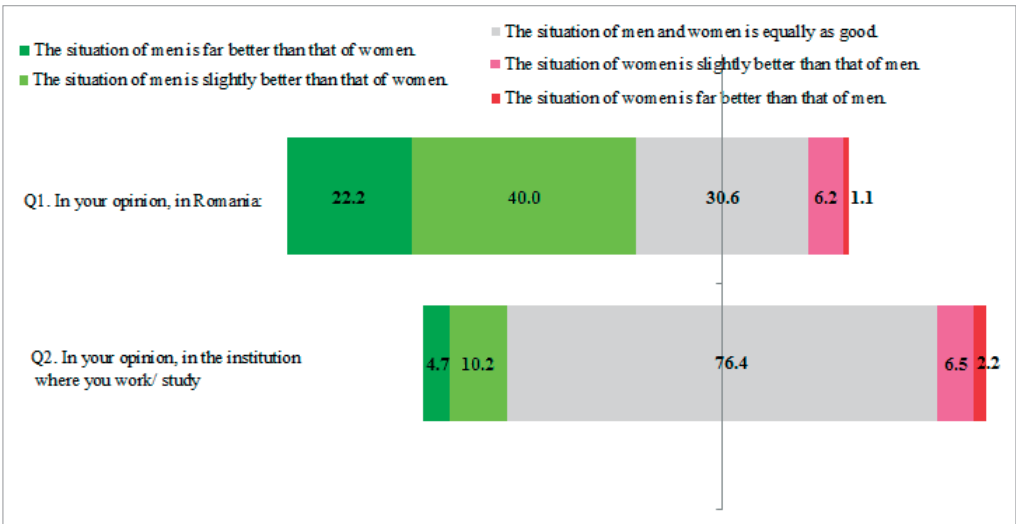
In the study cohort, 73.09% (201) were female, 25.04% (70) were male, and 1.45% (4) identified as other. Given the low number of people in the ‘other’ category (either people who did not want to declare their gender or identified as non-binary), their answers were included in the analysis but not examined separately, as were the answers of men and women. A majority of students (82.54%) were enrolled in Bachelor studies (227), while 14.9% (41) were Master students and 2.54% were PhD candidates (7). The age structure reflects the previous distribution, with over 89% of respondents (245) being below 25 years old. With regard to work experience, 85 respondents (30.9%) indicated that they were currently working or had worked in the past. In terms of fields of study, a majority of respondents (163) were students of the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Science (FSPAC), followed by students of the Faculty of Letters (66), Faculty of Biology and Geology (26), Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics (10), Faculty of Economics (4), Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (2), Faculty of Law (2), Faculty of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering (1), and Faculty of Physics (1). Significantly more respondents were studying ‘soft’ sciences, humanities and social sciences (237), than ‘hard’ sciences, exact and natural

sciences (38). Lastly, 256 respondents were students of the BBU Cluj-Napoca, while 19 were studying at the university's branch in Bistrița.

#### 4.2.2. Perceptions about gender equality

Five questions assessed students' perceptions about gender equality, as follows: in two questions students were requested to evaluate the situation of men and of women overall in Romania and at BBU, respectively (Figure 2); and three items assessed whether students believe gender equality has been achieved in Romania, whether women and men have equal opportunities on the labor market, and whether the state should intervene to achieve gender equality (Figure 3).

Results indicate a clear generalized view among students that women are underprivileged in Romania: 60.2% of students believe the situation of men is far better or slightly better than that of women, while only 7.3% of students believe women are in a more advantageous situation than men. Less than a third of students (30.6%) believe men's and women's situations are equally good. In contrast, a clear majority of students perceive that BBU is a gender equal environment: 76.4% of respondents indicated that the situation of men and women is equally good. Those who disagree tend to believe that men are more privileged (14.9%) and to a lesser extent that women have it better (8.7%).



**Figure 2:** Perceptions about men's and women's situation in Romania vs. at Babeş-Bolyai University

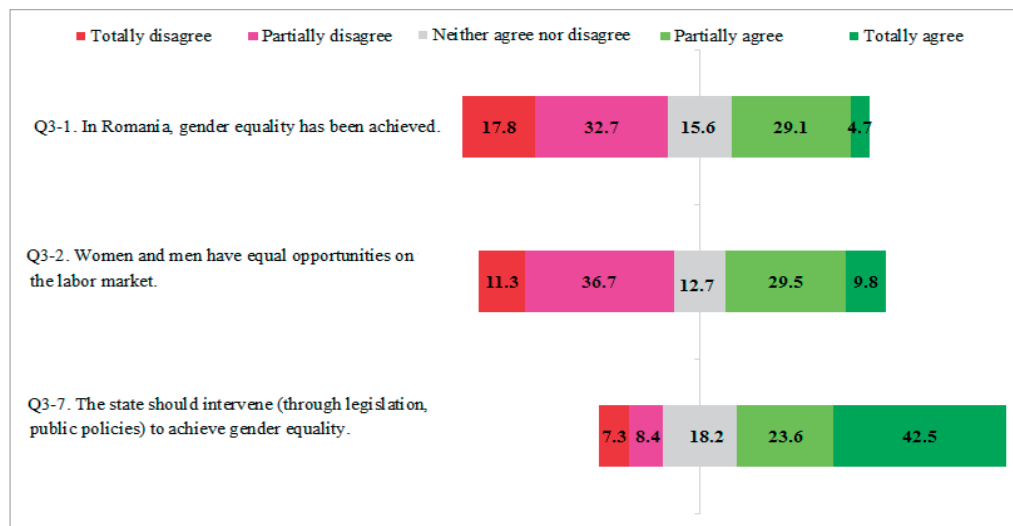
**Source:** The authors

A 2011 study (Şandor, Macarie and Creţa, 2011) applied a similar questionnaire to the one used for the present research to employees of public institutions from Romania (17 Prefectures, 19 County Councils and 14 City Halls, with a total of 938



respondents) and yielded somewhat similar results. 54.03% of respondents believed men's situation in Romania to be better than women's, 34.03% believed it to be the same, and 11.93% believed women to be privileged. In contrast, the situation of men and women in their respective institutions was deemed equally good by 60.89% of respondents, while 25.30% assessed men's situation as better, and 13.71% thought women were doing better (Șandor Macarie and Creța, 2011, p. 222). It can thus be observed that students of BBU have a slightly heightened awareness about gender inequality in Romanian society than the civil servants surveyed in 2011, which could be due to age difference, educational background or maybe to societal changes over the past eight years.

Interestingly, when asked directly whether gender equality has been achieved in Romania, students of BBU seem to hold opposing views on the issue: 50.5% of students disagree, 33.8% agree, and 15.6% are unsure. In addition, somewhat similar views emerged regarding equal opportunities on the labor market: 48% of students disagree that men and women have equal opportunities, while 39.3% agree. These results show that students are overall divided on the issue of gender equality, but that there is a clear tendency to perceive there is inequality between the sexes and to see men as having the upper hand in the country.



**Figure 3:** Perceptions about gender equality in Romania

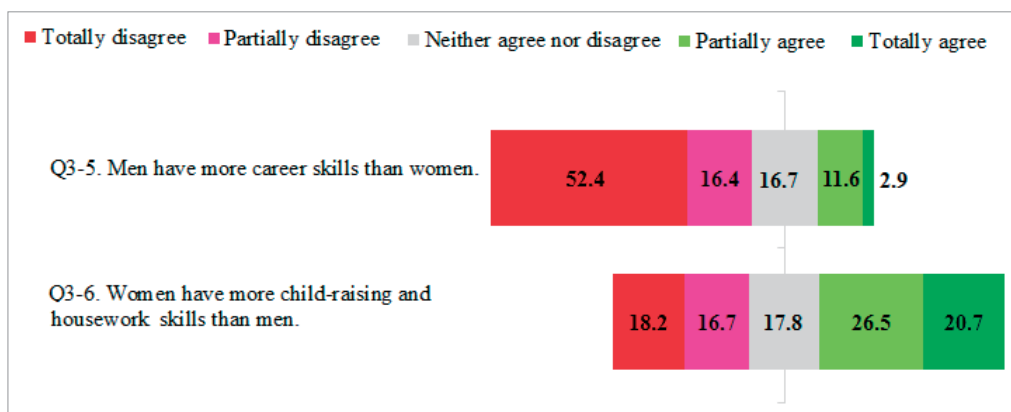
**Source:** The authors

Last but not least, students were clearly in favor of a strong, paternalist state that would enforce gender equality through legislation and public policies, possibly seeing the state as one of the main legitimate sources for social justice. It is, however, important to note that 163 of the 275 students who answered the questionnaire were

enrolled at the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, which may make them more likely to have a better understanding of the role of the state and public administration in enforcing or facilitating gender equality.

#### 4.2.3. Gender stereotypes

Stereotypical views about gender were assessed in two ways. Firstly, students were asked whether they believe men have more career skills than women and whether women have more domestic (child-raising and housework) skills than men. Students adamantly disagreed with the former: 68.8% did not believe men to have more career skills than women (with 52.4% of responding choosing total disagreement), while only 14.5% agreed with the statement. Views were more divided regarding women's domestic skills, with 34.9% disagreeing with the statement, and 47.2% agreeing with it. Thus, one could argue that career skills are generally more likely to be perceived as gender-neutral, while domestic skills are more likely to be seen as typical of females.



**Figure 4:** Perceived differences between men and women regarding career skills vs. child-raising and housework skills

**Source:** The authors

Secondly, students were asked to indicate whether 28 personality traits belong 1 – primarily to men, 2 – rather to men, 3 – equally to men and women, 4 – rather to women, 5 – primarily to women. When analyzing the data, the authors calculated the mean – the mean of all answers to each question, together with the mean of all the answers of men (male mean) and all the answers of women (female mean) – as well as the frequency distribution of the answers.

Of the 28 personality traits that students were asked to assess, 13 had a mean greater than 3.2, indicating that the trait is seen as more female than male (in descending order by mean, from most 'feminine' towards gender-neutral): Sensitivity; Emotiveness; Attention to detail; Dedication to family, Empathy; Conscientiousness; Patience; Intuition; Creativity; Prudence; Ability to communicate; Courtesy; Psycho-

**Table 1:** Personality traits as seen by each gender

	Personality Traits	Mean	Male Mean	Female Mean	Difference	p-value
Q4-1	Ability to communicate	3.273	3.257	3.284	-0.026	0.374
Q4-2	Aggression	2.124	2.329	2.060	0.269	0.020
Q4-3	Courtesy	3.273	3.100	3.323	-0.223	0.022
Q4-4	Ambition	3.116	2.971	3.164	-0.193	0.090
Q4-5	Attention to detail	3.865	3.543	3.970	-0.427	0.000
Q4-6	Authoritarianism	2.440	2.429	2.438	-0.009	0.456
Q4-7	Good collaborator	2.993	2.900	3.025	-0.125	0.123
Q4-8	Good subordinate	2.880	2.657	2.945	-0.288	0.004
Q4-9	Competitiveness	3.098	2.957	3.149	-0.192	0.052
Q4-10	Conscientiousness	3.480	3.243	3.557	-0.314	0.001
Q4-11	Creativity	3.382	3.286	3.423	-0.137	0.061
Q4-12	Courage	2.655	2.500	2.697	-0.197	0.038
Q4-13	Dedication to family	3.651	3.400	3.746	-0.346	0.002
Q4-14	Dedication to work	2.833	2.600	2.910	-0.310	0.003
Q4-15	Discipline in achieving goals	3.131	2.986	3.179	-0.193	0.041
Q4-16	Emotiveness	3.876	3.686	3.945	-0.260	0.005
Q4-17	Empathy	3.622	3.471	3.677	-0.205	0.041
Q4-18	Logical thinking	2.836	2.629	2.905	-0.277	0.031
Q4-19	Individualism	2.771	2.814	2.751	0.063	0.374
Q4-20	Intelligence	3.022	2.943	3.045	-0.102	0.227
Q4-21	Intuition	3.440	3.186	3.527	-0.342	0.004
Q4-22	Objectivity	2.796	2.686	2.841	-0.155	0.119
Q4-23	Perseverance	3.058	3.014	3.075	-0.060	0.291
Q4-24	Prudence	3.295	3.057	3.383	-0.326	0.005
Q4-25	Patience	3.465	3.157	3.572	-0.415	0.002
Q4-26	Physical resistance	2.044	2.057	2.045	0.012	0.440
Q4-27	Psychological resistance	3.211	2.943	3.294	-0.351	0.003
Q4-28	Sensitivity	3.935	3.814	3.975	-0.161	0.069

**Source:** The authors

logical resistance. The difference in the male and female means is statistically significant only for Emotiveness; Attention to detail; Dedication to family and Empathy; while both men and women see these traits as more feminine, women perceive them to be even more typically female than men do. The one trait where the difference between men and women is not statistically significant is Sensitivity, which is also the trait perceived to be the most feminine.

Only 6 traits were generally perceived as slightly more male, i.e. with a mean of less than 2.8 (in ascending order, from most 'male' towards gender-neutral): Physical

resistance; Aggression; Authoritarianism; Individualism; Courage; Objectivity. Interestingly, while women and men very much agree regarding physical resistance and authoritarianism (no statistical significance between the two means), they differ in how they perceive Aggression: both genders see it as a male trait, but women perceive it as even more typically male than men do.

Nine traits emerged as gender-neutral (with a mean between 2.8 and 3.2): Ambition, Competitiveness; Discipline in achieving goals; Perseverance; Good subordinate; Dedication to work; Logical thinking, together with Good collaborator and Intelligence, which both had a mean of 3, making them the two traits perceived to be the most gender-neutral traits in the studied cohort. There was a statistical significance (sig. level = 0.05) between men's and women's perceptions for only 16 of the 28 traits, highlighted in Table 1.

It is important to note that, given the high number of women compared to men who completed the questionnaire, the mean reflects women's perceptions to a larger extent than men's. In order to ensure that the mean of the students' answers is a reliable instrument to assess gender stereotypes, the authors also generated a divergent bar chart of the frequency distribution of the five response options, expressed in percentages (Figure 5). The graph confirms that the mean reflects students' perceptions. For instance, Q4-2, Aggression, is clearly skewed to the left, i.e. there is a strong perception among students that Aggression is typically a male trait.



**Figure 5:** Perceived personality traits (divergent bar chart of the five responses in terms of percent distribution)

**Source:** The authors

Other interesting results refer to differences in men's and women's perceptions of certain traits. For instance, Psychological resistance is seen by women as a slightly more female trait (3.294), while men see it as practically gender-neutral (2.943). Patience, Intuition, Empathy, Dedication to family, and Conscientiousness are generally seen as female traits, but women are even more likely to perceive them as typically female characteristics. In fact, of the 16 traits where there are statistically significant differences between men and women's perceptions, for 15 of them the female mean is higher than the male mean, indicating that women have a tendency to claim more traits for themselves than men. The only exception is Aggression, described above.

Previous research on gender stereotypes in Romania yielded similar results: two studies, applying a similar questionnaire on which the present study is based, found that women claimed more traits for themselves (Macarie, Creța and Șandor, 2011, p. 224; Șandor, Macarie and Creța, 2011). As the surveys were applied to employees of public institutions from Romania (95 respondents in the former study, which is also the pilot study, and 938 in the latter), there is indication that women, whether still in education or already in the labor market, are more prone to stereotype, or at least to stereotype about the specific 28 traits that were assessed in the survey. It may be that these traits are in fact objectively more likely to be seen in women than in men. An alternative explanation may relate to the so-called 'buffering' or mitigating effects of perceived stereotypes and prejudice against one's own group: since negative stereotypes may lead to discrimination and, thus, outgroup threat, they may also heighten women's own group identification (Dion, 2002, p. 2). In other words, because women are in fact more prone to being discriminated than men, they are in the same time more aware of this threat which in turn increases their identification with women as a group, as increased group cohesion translates to social support and reduced stress.

#### *4.2.4. Perceptions about gender-based violence*

Students' perceptions of gender-based violence were assessed through two questions regarding domestic violence (Q3-3 and Q3-4), presented in Table 2, and through ten questions concerning sexual harassment (Q5, items 1 to 10), presented in Table 3.

The former set of questions evaluated generic beliefs about whether men are victims of domestic violence to the same extent as women, thus testing how informed they are on the subject: disagreement with the statement shows a good perception of reality, while agreement with it indicates lack of information or even an underlying criticism of human rights discourse centering on women as primary victims of domestic violence.

**Table 2:** Perceptions about domestic violence

Response Options:	Q3-3. Men are equally subjected to domestic violence as women		Q3-4. Domestic violence has a direct effect on gender equality.	
	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency
Totally disagree	50.2	138	7.6	21
Partially disagree	23.6	65	8.4	23
Neither agree nor disagree	11.6	32	21.8	60
Partially agree	11.6	32	28.0	77
Totally agree	2.9	8	34.2	94

**Source:** The authors

Overall, students clearly disagreed (73.8%) that men were victims of domestic violence to the same extent as women. A minority of students (14.5%) expressed their belief that domestic violence affects men and women equally. These results show that most students are clearly aware that domestic violence is gendered and support previous results of the questionnaire which indicate a high sensitivity and awareness on the part of students around gender issues in general. Similarly, more than half of the respondents (62.2%) were able to draw a clear causal relationship between domestic violence and gender equality, with only 16% of students denying this relationship, a comparable percentage to that of respondents who see domestic violence as gender-neutral.

Sexual harassment in university and at work was assessed by looking at five inappropriate behaviors: indecent comments, promises in exchange for sexual favors, solicitation of sexual favors, unwanted gestures and touches, and sexual favors in exchange for work/ study benefits – with the odd items of question 5 referring to women, and the even ones to men.

Across all items, results clearly show that women are subjected to higher rates of sexual harassment than men: with the exception of indecent comments (to which 22.2% of respondents indicated men had never been subjected), more than 60% of students indicated that men were never subjected to any form of sexual harassment. Similarly, very few students responded that men were frequently (often and very often) subjected to sexual harassment, ranging from 2.2% for Q5-6 (sexual favors from men) to 14.2% for Q5-2 (men subjected to indecent comments). This is in contrast with the 50.9% of responses indicating that women were frequently (often and very often) subjected to indecent comments. Thus, the most frequent form of sexual harassment for women and men alike, although affecting women to a much higher extent, is indecent comments. For the other four forms of sexual harassment assessed by the questionnaire (promises in exchange for sexual favors, solicitation of sexual favors, unwanted gestures and touches, and sexual favors in exchange for work/ study benefits), roughly one in three students indicated they occur frequently (often and very often) for women.

**Table 3:** Perceived sexual harassment

<b>Q5. How often have you encountered the following situations?</b>					
	Never	Very rarely	Rarely	Often	Very often
Q5-1. Certain women were subjected to indecent comments from their colleagues.	8.0	14.2	26.9	42.5	8.4
Q5-2. Certain men were subjected to indecent comments from their colleagues.	22.2	32.0	31.6	11.3	2.9
Q5-3. Some women received promises in exchange for sexual favors.	30.5	12.0	22.2	26.9	8.4
Q5-4. Some men received promises in exchange for sexual favors.	63.6	21.1	10.2	4.4	0.7
Q5-5. Some superiors used their position to ask women for certain sexual favors.	36.4	11.6	16.7	27.6	7.6
Q5-6. Some superiors used their position to ask men for certain sexual favors.	68.7	21.1	8.0	2.2	0.0
Q5-7. Some women experienced unwanted gestures and touches from their colleagues.	23.6	17.1	21.5	28.0	9.8
Q5-8. Some men experienced unwanted gestures and touches from their colleagues.	67.6	17.8	11.6	2.9	0.0
Q5-9. Some women offered sexual favors in exchange for work/ study benefits.	35.3	14.2	20.0	23.3	7.3
Q5-10. Some men offered sexual favors in exchange for work/ study benefits.	61.8	21.1	11.6	3.6	1.8

**Source:** The authors

It stems that there is a need for the university to educate students on what constitutes sexual harassment and inappropriate behavior, particularly towards women, but also to have stricter monitoring of such behavior on the part of faculty staff and to facilitate reporting of sexual harassment when it occurs.

#### *4.2.5. Perceived discrimination*

In order to assess perceptions about workplace discrimination among students, which was tackled by question 6, the authors selected only the responses of students who had indicated work experience (either named their workplace or stated the number of years of work experience they had). Surprisingly, 190 students expressed their perceptions of workplace discrimination, despite the fact that only 85 of them indicated any work experience. The table below presents how the 85 students perceived discrimination at their workplace.

It is evident that students perceive that discrimination of women or men either never happens or that it is a rare occurrence: a third (34.1%) to almost a half of them (45.9%) indicate that they never witnessed or have no knowledge of anybody being discriminated against upon hiring, when setting up job responsibilities, upon promotion, when being evaluated or when receiving bonuses. However, a significant minority – roughly one in five students – indicate they perceive that discrimination



**Table 4:** Perceived workplace discrimination

<b>Response Options:</b>	Q6-1. Upon hiring	Q6-2. When setting up job responsibilities	Q6-3. During performance assessment	Q6-4. Upon promotion	Q6-5. Upon promotion to management positions	Q6-6. When giving bonuses
Never	40.0	34.1	45.9	40.0	40.0	45.9
Very rarely	24.7	20.0	15.3	11.8	12.9	14.1
Rarely	14.1	22.4	17.6	18.8	18.8	18.8
Often	21.2	22.4	21.2	25.9	20.0	17.6
Very often	0.0	1.2	0.0	3.5	8.2	3.5

**Source:** The authors

happens often and very often. The two most frequently perceived types of discrimination (often and very often) refer to discrimination upon promotion to any position (29.4%) and promotion to management positions (28.2%), which may be suggestive of a rather high awareness among students about the glass ceiling and other barriers holding women back from advancing in their careers. It is important to note that none of the respondents encountered or had knowledge of discrimination occurring very often upon hiring and during performance assessment and that, in general, few respondents witnessed any type of discrimination very often.

Conversely, Șandor Macarie and Creța (2011, p. 225) obtained different results: between 64.7% and 79.9% of respondents, depending on the item, indicated they had never encountered discrimination. Conversely, only between 1.7% and 10% of respondents stated that discrimination occurs often and very often. The differences between the two studies may either be due to low levels of discrimination in public institutions in Romania or, more likely, to age and educational differences between students of BBU and the surveyed civil servants, as the former are more likely to be exposed to feminism, social justice issues and human rights discourse in general, which may make them more adapt at perceiving discrimination when it occurs.

## 5. Conclusions

In order to assess students' perceptions about gender, the authors devised a questionnaire<sup>1</sup> following four dimensions: gender equality (as perceived at a national level compared to at the university level), prevalence of gender stereotypes (in relation to characteristics associated to personal and professional life), gender-based violence and sexual harassment (in Romania and in the university), and discrimination (at work).

Our data showed that students at BBU perceived high rates of gender inequality in Romania, with 60.2% of respondents indicating the situation of men is far better or

<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire we developed may be useful for university administrations from across the country to assess students' needs in terms of gender equality education and to design appropriate interventions on a case by case basis.

slightly better than that of women and 30.2% of students indicating that men's and women's situations are equally good. However, BBU was perceived to be a gender equal environment by a clear majority of students (76.4%). In addition, students were more likely to believe that gender equality has not been achieved in Romania (50.5% of respondents). Similarly, almost half of the respondents believe women and men do not have equal opportunities on the labor market. Lastly, students clearly supported a strong, paternalist state that would enforce gender equality through legislation and public policies.

Regarding gender stereotypes, students tended to perceive career skills as equally distributed among men and women, whereas child-caring and housework skills as more typically female. In addition, students perceive the majority of the 28 traits analyzed in the survey as being gender-neutral.

Perceptions about gender-based violence were rather polarized in one direction: students clearly disagreed (73.8%) that men are subjected to domestic violence as much as women, and a significant majority (62.2%) of them drew a causal relationship between domestic violence and gender equality. Data also showed that students perceive women to be subjected to much higher rates of sexual harassment than men: roughly one in three respondents indicated that sexual harassment occurs frequently for women. The most common form of sexual harassment for both women and men was reported to be indecent comments.

Lastly, the questionnaires revealed that workplace discrimination is rather rare, with a significant number of students with work experience claiming they have never witnessed it or had knowledge of it occurring. Nevertheless, roughly one in five students indicated that discrimination happens often and very often; the two most frequently perceived forms of discrimination were related to promotion, which may suggest awareness about barriers encountered by women in their professional life.

Overall, the results show that a majority of students of BBU have a heightened awareness about gender issues in general and have favorable views about gender equality, articulating normative beliefs about the role of the state in combatting inequalities, as well as expressing a good understanding of the complex relationship between violence against women and harassment, gender stereotypes, discrimination and gender equality. However, it is important to note that our data reflects women's views to a larger extent than men's, as well as the views of students enrolled in humanities and social sciences to the detriment of the exact sciences.

With regard to BBU specifically, the results of this exploratory study may be used to create a more inclusive educational environment for all its students, as well as to adjust the content of the educational activities so as to ensure gender mainstreaming in its curriculum. For instance, as sexual harassment emerged as an issue, the administration could implement (more) awareness campaigns and create more efficient mechanisms of sanctioning and reporting inappropriate behavior. The study has the potential to be replicated in other universities and serve as the basis for a more in-depth comparison of perceptions about gender issues in Romanian academia and beyond.

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