

# Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values Regarding the Chances of Success in Life for Young People in Contemporary Romanian Society; The Role of Gender Equality in Personal, Public, and Professional Life

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## SUMMARY

The article presents the results of a quantitative research conducted online in October 2023 on a sample of 685 young people aged between 20 and 35, focusing on perceptions and values of young people related to their chances of success in life. The central focus of the research was the perception of the influence of gender equality on social success. The article aimed, on one hand, to identify perceptions regarding the model of a successful woman in general and, on the other hand, to identify specific essential characteristics for both women and men in politics. The theoretical foundation of the research was based on the Theory of Capitals: social, cultural, economic (Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam) and erotic (Hakim, Green). The data presented includes: perceptions of personal success, professional, and political spheres, identifying useful characteristics for female politicians on one hand and male politicians on the other, as well as how gender equality functions in certain leadership roles.

According to the results, attention to general culture is essential for a successful woman (80% of respondents gave this component a score of 10), followed by attention to clothing, hairstyle, and body care. Over 75% of the young people mentioned that a woman who wants to engage in politics should largely be intelligent, presentable, responsible toward others, courageous, firm, organized, honest, wise, and career-oriented. The first three characteristics are also present in the case of men, in the same order, but all the others have much lower values (below 50%), suggesting greater pressure on women to have many more positive attributes to succeed in politics.

The study also highlights the influence of erotic capital on success in life. Over 70% of young people agree that a beautiful woman has a better chance of succeeding in life than a less beautiful woman. Moreover, over 80% of respondents gave scores above 8 (on a scale of 1 to 10), supporting the idea that a woman's success in a job interview is influenced by how well she is groomed. The data also show that young people have a strong openness to gender equality regarding how certain public positions are filled. However, a series of stereotypes are also presented, even among young people.

**Keywords:** Success in life; professional success, social capital, social mobility, erotic capital; social attractiveness; women and romanian politics, social change; young people

## THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN POLITICS: A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

The status of women in politics has seen significant evolution in recent decades, yet inequalities persist globally. In many democracies, women continue to be underrepresented in political institutions, even though their participation has increased considerably in certain regions. According to 2023 data, women hold, on average, only 26% of parliamentary seats worldwide, although this percentage has risen from 11% in 1995 (IPU, 2023). This underrepresentation can be attributed to a complex set of factors, including cultural barriers, gender discrimination, and difficulties in accessing the political and economic resources necessary to compete in elections (Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

A central aspect of the status of women in politics is related to gender stereotypes that persist in many cultures, influencing public perception of women's competence as political leaders. Studies show that female politicians are often judged more harshly than men, being more frequently criticized for their leadership style and political decisions (Schneider & Bos, 2014). These stereotypes can discourage women from engaging in politics and can limit their access to leadership positions. In this context, affirmative measures, such as gender quotas, have been implemented in various countries to increase the political representation of women. Although these measures have often been controversial, they have proven effective in increasing the number of women in parliaments and governments (Krook, 2009).

Additionally, women's access to high political office can be affected by institutional structures and social norms that dominate in each country. In some states, proportional electoral systems have facilitated greater representation of women compared to majoritarian systems, which tend to favor male candidates (Matland, 1998). Moreover, the cultural context and social norms play a crucial role in shaping political opportunities for women. In societies where gender equality is actively promoted, women tend to have a more significant political presence, reflecting a shift in social perceptions of gender roles (Paxton & Hughes, 2014).

### **General Statistics from the European Union (2023)**

#### **National Parliaments:**

- On average, women occupy approximately 32.7% of the seats in national parliaments across European Union countries (IPU, 2023).
- The countries with the highest representation of women in national parliaments include Sweden (46.1%), Finland (45.5%), and Spain (44.0%).
- Countries with lower representation of women in parliaments are Hungary (13.6%), Romania (19%), and Cyprus (15.7%).

#### **European Parliament:**

- In the European Parliament, women hold approximately 39.3% of the seats in 2023, which represents significant progress compared to previous years (European Parliament, 2023).

#### **National Governments:**

- The representation of women in national governments (ministers, state secretaries, etc.) also varies across the EU. In countries like Sweden and Finland, women make up more than 50% of cabinet members, while in other states, such as Hungary and Romania, the proportion is considerably lower.

### **The Status of Women in Politics in Romania**

In Romania, the status of women in politics reflects both the progress and challenges women face in achieving fair representation in the political sphere. Although Romania has adopted measures to support women's participation in politics, such as legislation promoting equal opportunities between women and men, women's representation in political positions remains below the European average. In the Romanian Parliament, in the 2020-2024 legislature, women represent approximately 19% of deputies and 16% of senators, a slight increase compared to previous legislatures, but still below the optimal level for fair representation (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021).

One contributing factor to the underrepresentation of women in Romanian politics is the male-dominated political culture, where informal networks and clientelism play a significant role. These networks, often controlled by men, can limit women's access to positions of power and influence (Popescu, 2016). Additionally, gender stereotypes and traditionalist attitudes about women's roles in society negatively impact women's political participation. Women are often perceived as more suitable for secondary or supportive roles rather than leadership positions (Miroiu, 2004).

However, there are signs of progress, especially at the local level, where the number of female mayors and local councilors has gradually increased. Moreover, several prominent female figures have managed to secure leadership positions in political parties or central administration, suggesting a slow but steady shift in attitudes toward women's roles in politics. In recent years, we've seen more female party leaders, such as Viorica Dăncilă, Alina Gorghiu, and recently Elena Lasconi, particularly in major parties, but we also had the first female Prime Minister, Viorica Dăncilă, and the first female Mayor of Bucharest, Gabriela Firea. Twenty years ago, these developments seemed impossible.

Non-governmental organizations and women's rights advocacy groups have also played a crucial role in promoting women's political participation and raising public awareness about the importance of gender equality in politics (Chiva, 2009).

## METHODOLOGY

The article is based on a quantitative study conducted in October 2023 on a sample of 685 young people aged between 20 and 35 years.

The main objective of the study was to identify perceptions regarding the model of a successful woman and to identify essential characteristics for both women and men in politics. The study also explored young people's perceptions of the influence of erotic capital on success in life, including its positive or negative role in the political environment.

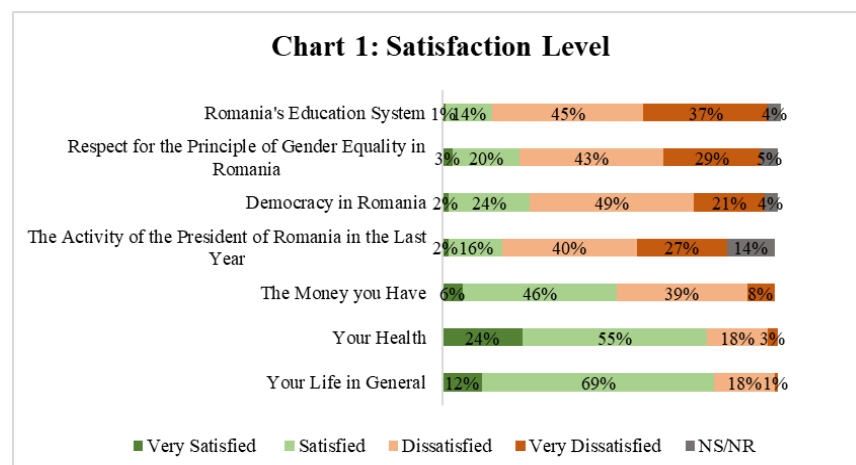
This research draws on various theories of forms of capital and their role in social mobility and stratification, from the theory of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to erotic capital, a term used by Adam Green (2008/2013) and monetized and developed by Catherine Hakim (2010/2014). Social capital also has important approaches regarding rational choice theory (Coleman, 1988) or within the tradition of political culture (Putnam, 1995/2000).

Starting from these objectives, the present study has several fundamental research questions:

1. What are young people's perceptions regarding success in life?
2. What is the role of gender equality in personal, public, and/or professional life?

## Success in Personal and Professional Life

At the beginning of the questionnaire, a general question with multiple items was used to assess young people's satisfaction with various aspects of life. It is noteworthy that over 80% of the young people surveyed (81%) are dissatisfied with the way things are going in Romania. As observed in Chart 1, young people are most dissatisfied with the education system in Romania. It is evident that since many respondents are still in school (or university), they are perhaps the most directly affected and best positioned to evaluate this system. The staggering percentage of over 80% of respondents expressing high levels of dissatisfaction is a warning signal for our country.



Gender equality ranks second among the areas of dissatisfaction for young people in Romania, with only 3% being very satisfied, another 20% satisfied, and the rest dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. A more detailed analysis reveals that young women still feel discriminated against, despite decades of efforts for gender equality. Depending on gender, 10% more women than men reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the principle of gender equality.

Democracy in Romania is also not positively evaluated by young people, with 70% stating that they are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with how it functions in the country. The activity of the President of Romania in the past year (2023) is similarly evaluated negatively by students, with 68% expressing dissatisfaction. Notably, this question had the highest percentage of non-responses: 14% of young people choose the "don't know/no answer" option regarding the activity of the highest office in the state, suggesting a low level of interest in politics among those under 35 years of age.

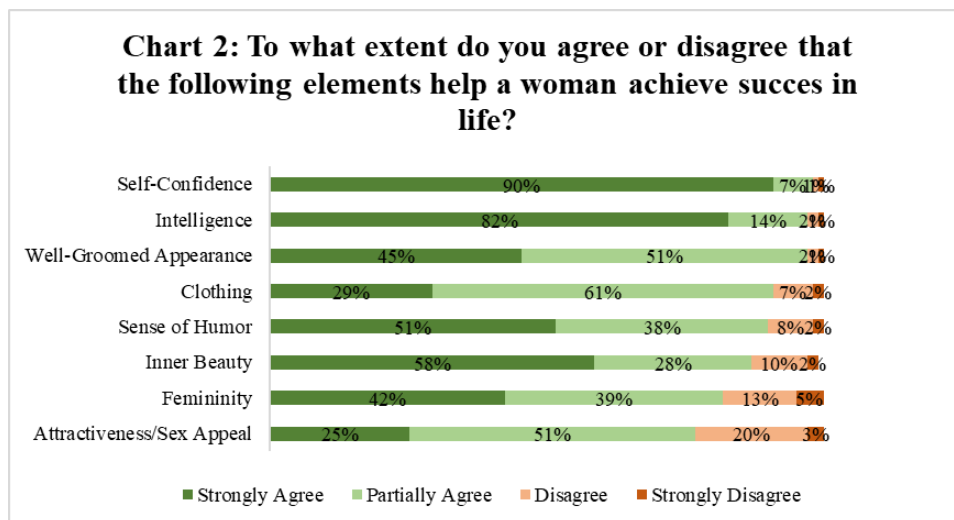
Respondents are somewhat more satisfied with the money they have, though nearly half (47%) declared themselves dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. On the other hand, young people are most satisfied with their health and life in general, with approximately 80% expressing satisfaction or great satisfaction in these areas.

Respondents were then asked to evaluate certain elements of erotic capital in the context of the ideal model of a successful woman (according to the theory of erotic capital proposed by C. Hakim/2014). According to the results, attention to general culture is essential for a successful woman (80% of respondents gave this component a score of 10), followed by attention to clothing (75%), attention to hairstyle (71%), attention to body care practices – manicure, pedicure, waxing, treatments (70%), and attention to makeup (68%).

Interestingly, when asked, "On a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 means not at all and 10 means maximum), how much do you think a woman's success in an interview is influenced by how she is elegantly groomed?" 75% of young people gave scores above 8, and only 5% rated the hypothesis below 6.

The study also highlights the influence of erotic capital on success in life. The central idea of erotic capital—that an attractive person has better chances of succeeding in life than a less attractive person—is an idea that resonates with 68% of respondents (50% fully agree with the statement, 18% partially agree). Only 7% of young people disagree with the theory that attractive people have better chances of success, while a quarter of them chose the option "neither agree nor disagree."

When asked about each indicator individually (according to Hakim's theory and supplemented by my 2022 article), as shown in Chart 2, the previously mentioned data is confirmed. Thus, the top three "ingredients" for being a successful woman, according to respondents, are self-confidence (97%), intelligence (96%), and a well-groomed physical appearance (96%).



It is worth noting that these elements are actually components of erotic capital as defined by Catherine Hakim (2014), with the exception of self-confidence, which is not included in her theory. In other words, as another

study I conducted in 2022 emphasized the importance of self-confidence for the theory of erotic capital, this study further reinforces the thesis that self-confidence should be included among its components.

### **Professional Success and the Political Sphere**

Over 75% of young people mentioned that a woman who wants to engage in politics must largely be intelligent, presentable, responsible towards others, courageous, firm, organized, honest, wise, and career-oriented. It is noteworthy that, although the exact same characteristics are considered necessary for a man to engage in politics, young people placed much more emphasis on intelligence, presentability, and courage (with over 85% of respondents selecting the "to a large extent" option for these three characteristics). For the other qualities necessary for a man, these received a score of less than 50%.

However, the following two questions addressed to respondents were also interesting: to what extent do they believe a woman is suitable for politics, and to what extent do they believe women want to engage in politics. Thus, 87% of respondents gave scores above 8, indicating that most young people believe that women are also suitable for political positions. However, when asked to what extent they think women actually want to engage in politics, only 43% of those surveyed gave scores above 8. The majority of young people for this question gave scores between 5 and 7 (56%).

Chart 3 provides a breakdown of respondents' level of agreement with a series of statements related to the presence of women in politics. The data is expressed as percentages and divided into two categories: total agreement/partial agreement (represented by green bars) and partial disagreement/total disagreement (represented by orange bars). The interpretation of the chart can be divided into four sub-themes as follows:

#### **Statements with a high level of disagreement:**

"Women are not competitive enough to engage in politics" – 64% of respondents disagree with this statement, indicating that the majority believe women have the necessary competitiveness to be involved in politics.

"Men naturally know better how to lead" – 45% of respondents disagree with this statement, while 55% agree, suggesting an almost equal division of opinions with a slight tendency to support this idea.

#### **Statements with a high level of agreement:**

"Women are better negotiators than men" – 80% of respondents agree with this statement, reflecting a positive perception of women's negotiation skills.

"Women are more interested in the issues of those around them" and "Women are as suitable as men to engage in politics" – Both statements have an 86% agreement, indicating a broad consensus that women are competent and engaged in social issues.

#### **Statements related to the impact of increasing the number of women in politics:**

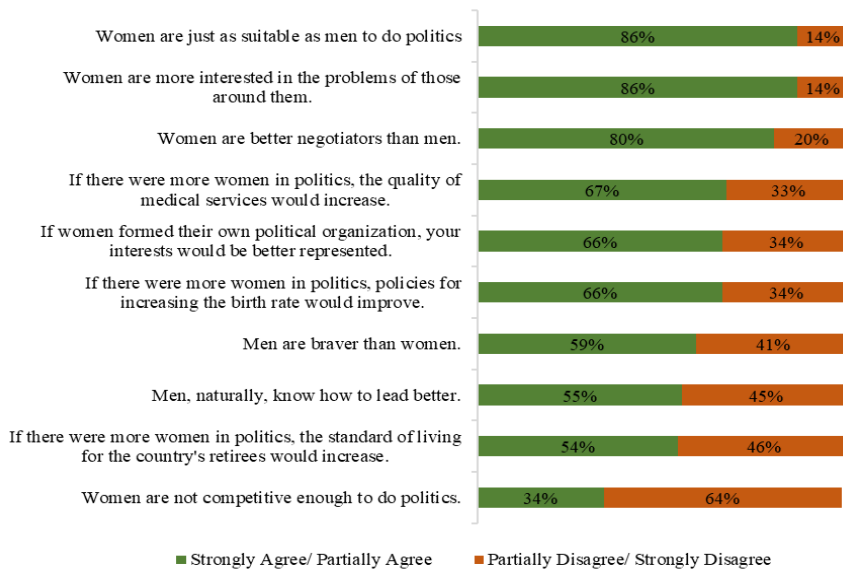
"If there were more women in politics, the standard of living for the country's retirees would increase" and "If there were more women in politics, policies to increase birth rates would rise" – Both statements have over 50% agreement (54% and 66%, respectively), suggesting that respondents believe that a greater presence of women in politics would have a positive impact on these aspects.

#### **Perceptions of courage and leadership:**

"Men are braver compared to women" – 59% of respondents agree, indicating a widespread perception that men are more courageous.

"Men naturally know better how to lead" – Although more respondents agree with this statement (55%), a significant proportion (45%) disagrees, suggesting that this opinion is not universally accepted.

**Chart 3: To what extent do you agree with the following statements**



The graph suggests that, in general, respondents have a positive perception of the role of women in politics, recognizing their negotiation skills, interest in social issues, and political competence. However, there are still mixed opinions regarding the natural superiority of men in terms of leadership and courage, indicating the persistence of certain gender stereotypes/social clichés. Nevertheless, there is considerable support for the idea that a greater presence of women in politics would bring social and economic benefits. Upon a more detailed analysis, we could say that:

**Gender Stereotypes:** The graph shows a clear discrepancy between perceptions of the capabilities of women and men in politics, particularly in statements like "Men are braver than women" and "Men naturally know better how to lead." Although more than half of respondents agree with these statements, there is still a significant minority that disagrees, indicating that traditional gender stereotypes are being challenged by a part of the population.

**Perception of Courage and Competence:** The discrepancy between men and women in terms of courage and leadership ability may reflect cultural and historical norms that associate leadership and bravery with masculinity. These norms are still deeply rooted in many societies and can influence how people perceive the competence of women in high-responsibility political roles.

**Perception of the Positive Influence of Women:** Statements such as "If there were more women in politics, the standard of living for the country's pensioners would improve" and "If there were more women in politics, policies for increasing birth rates would improve" indicate a generally positive perception of the influence of women in politics. The majority of respondents agree that a greater presence of women would have a beneficial impact on essential areas of social policy. This suggests that women are seen as having a unique and valuable perspective that can contribute to the improvement of social policies.

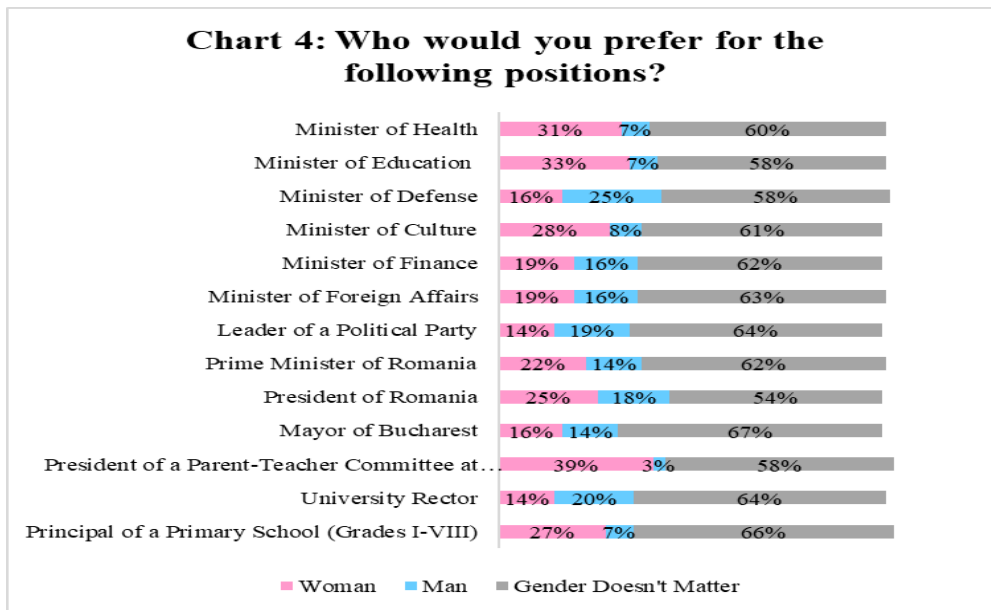
**Perceived Importance of Women:** Respondents seem to recognize that women can bring different but complementary qualities to politics, such as negotiation, organization, and social responsibility. The statements "Women are better negotiators than men" and "Women are more interested in the problems of others" receive broad support, indicating a recognition of qualities traditionally associated with femininity as being beneficial in politics. This may reflect an increasing openness to diversity in leadership styles.

**Persistence of Stereotypes:** Although there is significant support for the idea that women are just as suitable as men to be involved in politics (86% total/partial agreement), there is still a minority that remains hesitant about this idea. This shows that, although attitudes have changed over time, some gender biases and stereotypes persist.

**Polarization Trends:** In the case of some statements, such as "Women are not competitive enough to do politics," we see a clear division of public opinion, with a significant 34% agreeing with this statement, despite the majority disagreeing. This indicates that there is still polarization of opinions on this matter.

**Need for Supportive Policies:** To support gender equality in politics, it would be beneficial to implement policies that facilitate women's access to political positions, such as gender quotas or mentoring programs for young women interested in political careers. This could help reduce perception gaps and increase the number of women in leadership positions.

**Future Trends:** If this type of research were conducted periodically, it would be interesting to observe how these perceptions evolve over time, particularly in the context of political and social changes. For example, we could also observe the impact of certain programs or public policy measures and, consequently, changes in public perceptions regarding the reduction of gender disparities.



difference up to 100% Don't know/Don't answer

Graph 4 illustrates respondents' preferences regarding the gender of the individual who should occupy various political and administrative positions in Romania. The data is expressed in percentages and divided into three categories: preference for a woman (represented by pink bars), preference for a man (represented by light blue bars), and "gender doesn't matter" (represented by gray bars).

The interpretation of the graph can be approached by categorizing the mentioned positions into four types as follows:

**Positions with a preference for women:**

**President of the Parents' Committee in a middle school:** 39% of respondents prefer a woman in this position, the highest preference for a woman among all listed roles. This may reflect stereotypes related to women's roles in education and child care.

**Minister of Education:** 33% of respondents prefer this position to be held by a woman, reflecting an association between education and qualities more commonly attributed to women, such as empathy and organization.

**Minister of Health:** 31% prefer a woman in this role, suggesting a connection between gender and assigning roles in the health sector, where women are often seen as more suitable due to the perception of their competence in caring for others.

### Positions with a preference for men:

**Minister of Defense:** 25% of respondents prefer a man for this role, reflecting traditional gender stereotypes that associate men with strength and the ability to lead in areas involving defense or national security.

**University Rector:** 20% prefer a man in this role, and **President of a political party** and **Mayor of Bucharest** have similar preferences of 19%, indicating that men are still perceived as traditional leaders in leadership and administration roles.

### Positions where gender matters less:

Generally, the majority of positions shown in the graph indicate that over 50% of respondents believe that "gender doesn't matter" for holding these positions, suggesting a trend towards gender equality in public perception.

Positions such as **Minister of Finance (62%)**, **Minister of Foreign Affairs (63%)**, **Mayor of Bucharest (67%)**, and **Principal of a school with grades 1-8 (66%)** are viewed as gender-neutral, indicating a growing openness among the public to professional competence regardless of gender.

### Positions with the most balanced preferences:

The role of **President of Romania** shows fairly balanced gender preferences: 25% for women and 18% for men, with a majority of 54% considering that gender doesn't matter. This distribution suggests that while there are still some gender preferences, a significant proportion of the population is open to the idea that this position could be held by either gender.

The graph indicates that while there are certain positions where gender plays a role in respondents' preferences, there is a general trend towards accepting the idea that competence for various roles is not determined by gender. However, persistent stereotypes, especially in areas like defense, political leadership, and education, are still evident. Of course, it should also be noted that the aspirations of young people to pursue various positions are also related to how such role models appear in the public space.

In addition to the analysis already provided, we can explore some additional aspects of the graph, focusing on the sociological and cultural implications of the respondents' preferences, as well as the possible reasons behind these preferences:

**Traditional gender roles:** Preferences for women in roles related to education (Minister of Education, President of the Parents' Committee) and health (Minister of Health) suggest that traditional gender roles still influence public perception. Women are often perceived as more suitable for roles involving education, caregiving, and interpersonal relationships, reflecting stereotypes that persist in society.

**Gender stereotypes in leadership:** The preference for men in roles such as Minister of Defense and University Rector reflects traditional stereotypes that men are seen as more suitable for leadership roles that require strength, authority, and expertise in fields considered "masculine."

**Openness to gender equality:** The high percentage of respondents who indicated that "gender doesn't matter" for most roles suggests an emerging trend toward gender equality and a diminishing of traditional stereotypes. This may be the result of awareness campaigns and changes in social attitudes, especially among younger generations.

**Evolving perceptions of women in politics:** In highly visible roles, such as Prime Minister and President of Romania, preferences are more balanced, indicating a growing acceptance of the idea that women can hold leadership positions at the highest level. This may reflect increased exposure to strong female leaders both internationally and nationally, who have demonstrated competence and success.



**Generational shifts in attitudes:** It is possible that these data are influenced by the demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as age and education. Younger generations, in general, tend to be more open to gender equality and less influenced by traditional stereotypes. This could explain the high preference for "gender doesn't matter" in many of the roles.

**Education's influence:** Individuals with higher levels of education may be more aware of the importance of diversity and equality in leadership, which could contribute to more favorable perceptions of women in leadership roles.

**The role of media:** The media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of gender and politics. Constant exposure to strong female figures in politics, whether domestically or internationally, can gradually shift attitudes and contribute to the acceptance of women in top political positions.

**Political discourse:** Political parties and leaders who promote gender equality and the inclusion of women in positions of power can also influence public preferences and perceptions. Thus, progressive policies and pro-equality rhetoric can help reduce gender differences in preferences for leadership roles.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study's results reveal that young people in Romania, aged between 20 and 35, have a nuanced perception of gender equality and life success opportunities. Although there is broad recognition of women's skills and abilities, including in the political sphere, their underrepresentation continues to be a problem for Romanian society. The data shows that while the majority of respondents believe that women are just as suitable as men to hold political office, there is still a perception that women do not wish to actively engage in the political arena.

Regarding erotic capital, the study emphasizes that it plays a significant role in the perception of success for both women and men. Elements such as self-confidence, a well-groomed appearance, and intelligence are considered essential for professional success, and by extension, for political success. However, women face higher expectations in terms of presentability and personal style. The study also highlights a divide in perceptions related to courage and leadership abilities, with a significant proportion of young people still associating these traits with masculinity, suggesting that traditional stereotypes remain present in the collective mindset.

This analysis underscores the complexity of young Romanians' perceptions of gender equality, highlighting both the progress made in recognizing women's competencies and the ongoing challenges in overcoming cultural and social barriers. Respondents acknowledge that success in politics requires a combination of traits such as presentability, intelligence, and courage, but they also point out that women must overcome additional challenges related to gender stereotypes.

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