

# GENDER DIMENSION IN MARGINALIZED RURAL COMMUNITIES

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## Abstract

The status of women living in the rural European space is extremely varied, as their living and cultural conditions differ considerably from one zone to another; on the other side, it goes without saying that the programs of rural development cannot solve the difficult issue of the equality of gender. The main aspect to be mentioned here is that only scarce information is available on the (in)equality of gender, respectively on the situation of women from the rural areas of Europe. In most of the cases, the main difficulties women have to face in the society of today refer to their obligation of playing a double role: to take care of their families, while also entering the market of labor for attaining financial independence. In marginalized, poor communities, considered as extremely problematic, being characterized by low-income households, and inhabited by people with a low educational and competence level, a high ratio of single mothers, numerous children and a high delinquency (WORLD BANK, 2016), assuming of such a double role might appear as a desiderate. Unfortunately, the main burden is the absence of a stable job and, therefore, of an increased income, generally insufficient for supporting a numerous family – a most common situation in these rural zones. More than that, women from marginalized communities are exposed to higher risks of poverty and social exclusion, as a result of restricted access to education, health services and social assistance. All these observations, along with other aspects of socio-economic nature which women from the rural areas are confronted with, have been approached in a complex social inquiry organized in 6 marginalized rural communities - Răuseni (Botoșani district), Andrieșeni, Vlădeni, Hălăucești and Slobozia (Iași district), Negrești (Vaslui district).

**Keywords:** gender, marginalised communities, rural Romania.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Romania, about half of its population lives in rural zones, large part of it being unfavourably affected both from the viewpoint of the incomes and from the absence of a modern infrastructure and basic services. Consequently, the needs of such communities are quite varied, the opinion of the authors of the present study being that

much more attention should be given to these marginalized Romanian population.

According to the study entitled *Elaboration of strategies for the integration of marginalized communities – Atlas of marginalized zones of Romania* (SWINKELS et al., 2016), three main criteria should be considered for defining and analyzing the types of marginalized zones, namely: the human capital (usually, education, health status, size and composition of the households), occupation and living conditions, mention being made of the fact that *almost all studies devoted to this field in Romania, whichever the research method applied, indicate these three main criteria for the definition and analysis of marginalization.*

The present investigation involved a systematic radiography of six marginalized rural communities - Răuseni (Botoșani district), Andrieșeni, Vlădeni, Hălăucești and Slobozia (Iași district), Negrești (Vaslui district), in relation with gender differences, as expressed by the main economic and educational indices. The scope was of establishing whether discrimination is caused by gender or, in other words, if, in such marginalized communities, women are more vulnerable than men.



Fig. 1. Map of the marginalized rural communities selected for the case study

In this respect, considering the gradual, yet profound structural mutations registered by the Romanian rural space, a logical, qualitative and quantitative analysis of the phenomenon of gender inequality manifested in marginal rural communities was developed, starting from praxis to theory, for evidencing the main socio-economic aspects women from the rural area are faced with, by a complex social inquiry developed at Răuseni (Botoșani district), Andrieșeni, Vlădeni, Hălăucești and Slobozia (Iași district), Negrești (Vaslui district) (Fig. 1), localities considered as belonging to the category of marginalized rural communities (Sandu et al., 2016).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The present study approaches the issue of gender in the rural space by means of some specific marginalization indices. A complex social inquiry was performed, based on a classically structured (with a reduced degree of structuration), non-dissimulated and transversal poll permitting the identification, characteristics and common and particular aspects, aimed at finding possible solutions in the future. The main instrument of data collecting was the questionnaire, on considering 455 poll units, the

research unit being represented by the communities from the above-mentioned 6 localities, the questionnaires being relatively uniform on each community in part, as a function of their size.

The scope of the study is of identifying the alarm signals related to the progressive gender inequality recorded in the marginalized rural communities under analysis. In other words, focus is laid on some obvious signs of discrimination on gender criteria, as a basis for subsequent, more complete investigations upon such a phenomenon. In this respect, observations are provided on the socio-economic status of women from the six communities and on the identified gender differences.

The study made use of 455 questionnaires in all six rural communities (Table 1), the ratio of respondents in each marginalized community being the following:

- in Andrieșeni, 81.13% respondents were women and 18.86% - men;
- in Vlădeni, 80% women and 20% - men;
- in Răuseni, 65.77% women and 34.23% - men;
- in Hălăucești, 63.51% women and 36.49% - men;
- in Slobozia, 61.54% women and 38.46% - men;
- in Negrești, 66.67% women and 39.5% - men.

Table 1. Number of respondents in each marginalized community

Community/ No. respondents	Andrieșeni	Vlădeni	Răuseni	Hălăucești	Slobozia	Negrești	Total respondents
Women	43	60	98	47	40	26	314
Men	10	15	51	27	25	13	141
Total respondents	53	75	149	74	65	39	455

On the whole, out of the six communities, the ratios of respondents who filled in the questionnaires were as follows: 69.01% - women and 30.99% - men. Among the respondent women, 13.69% were from Andrieșeni, 19.11% from Vlădeni, 31.21% - Răuseni, 14.97% - Hălăucești, 12.74% - and 8.28% from Negrești.

Sampling within the communities was made randomly, as a function of the availability of their inhabitants to participate to the inquiry. More than that, the interpretation of results had in view the lower number of respondent men,

comparatively with that of women, the calculated ratios being analyzed separately, from the perspective of gender. In other words, the report did not consider the whole number of respondents, but the ratio of women who gave a certain response out of the total number of representatives of the feminine gender, respectively the ratio of men out of the whole representatives of the masculine one. Also, when using the questionnaires, the dimension of the evaluated communities was considered *versus* the number of inhabitants, in the attempt made

at having a number of questionnaires directly proportional with the number of residents.

### **3. GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE RURAL SPACE. GENERAL ASPECTS**

The gender characteristics recorded in the Romanian rural space have been scarcely approached in the literature of the field. The problems of the rural space, the socio-economic profile of its inhabitants, the various specific features and the urban-rural discrepancies have not been analyzed in detail, from the gender perspective. Are the problems of rural women identical with those of the rural men? Does gender influence social exclusion at this level? Are women less favorized, as to their socio-economic status, comparatively with men? Disregard of such aspects might create an erroneous approach from the perspective of socio-economic policies, making even more difficult the situations of women or indirectly affecting them in a negative manner, while making impossible the utilization of such abilities and specific competences in a productive way for the society. For example, Agarwal (2000) mentions that, generally, women are more available to invest time and energy for saving their material resources, are more interested in social causes and in environmental protection, their spirit of sacrifice being higher than that of men.

Thus, women are more ready to give up their own interests for a social cause, for promoting and supporting a sustainable society. Other studies show that women are better collaborators than men (ECKEL & GROSSMAN, 1998). More than that, the effects of gender differences are related with at least six critical aspects: time, income, nutrition, health, social connections, information systems (AGARWAL, 1997).

In the rural areas, the main role of women is that of taking care of children and of their households. If, in the urban milieu, things have evolved, namely the domestic tasks are divided among all members of the family, in the country the whole obligations of the house are left on „women’s shoulders”. They have in charge the daily necessities specific to a rural house, its administration and confrontation with all

financial challenges, as well as the task of children’s education. The main issue appears when the main financial support is brought by the father, being therefore distributed according to his options/preferences. From this perspective, and mainly in disorganized families, women have obvious disadvantages, facing the impossibility of solving the daily financial needs. When depending wholly on a man, woman’s dependence, her decisional capacity and the possibility of any option are almost wholly annulled<sup>1</sup>. Under such circumstances, women are mainly depending on the subsistence agriculture (AGARWAL, 2011) (especially animal breeding), which shackles them to their household. All these aspects support the idea of an unequal and unfair family arrangement, not in terms of a comparative life outside the family, yet by analyzing the gain which the man and the woman obtain within it (SEN, 2000; AGARWAL et al., 2003). If, in urban spaces, the most frequent difficulties women are confronted with in the actual society refer to their obligation of playing a double role: of taking care of the family and of being also active in the labor market, for having financial independence, in poor, marginalized rural communities, such a double role appears as a desiderate. Unfortunately, the main burden is the absence of a stable job and, therefore, of an increased income, generally insufficient for supporting a numerous family – a most common situation in these rural zones. Such a type of financial independence might increase woman’s confidence in her own forces, her capacity of taking decisions and her right to opinion and choice. More than that, women from marginalized communities are exposed to a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion, as a result of their limited access to education, social and health services.

### **4. GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE RURAL SPACE. ASPECTS SPECIFIC TO THE MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES UNDER ANALYSIS**

#### **The human capital in marginalized rural communities**

The urgent need of reform in the education system is approached in *Social Policy in the EU – Reform Barometer 2016*, with special reference

to the quality of the didactic act and of school abandonment (DE GEUS et al., 2016). The quality of education determines, to a considerable extent, the quality of life, thus creating opportunities for a full accomplishment of each citizen's capacities (*Education – 2020. Sectorial Strategy of Development for the years 2012 – 2020*). *Education helps to the development of communities and opens the way to new social opportunities* (MONEL, 2011).<sup>2</sup> In other words, the education level of residents contributes directly to the welfare of a community, while *Guide of the Applicant – specific conditions. "Integrated Local Development (DLI 360<sup>0</sup>) in marginalized communities"*, *Priority Axis 4: Social inclusion and poverty combat, POCU 2014-2020*, considers this variable in the calculation algorithm for the inclusion of certain zone into the category of marginalized zone or not. Consequently, the minimum threshold of the persons with ages ranking between 15 and 64 years who attended maximum 8 classes, considered as characteristic for a marginalized community, is of 22% (XXX Ghidul solicitantului, 2015). Accordingly, if at least 22% of the inhabitants of some zone, with ages within the above-mentioned limits did not attend more than 8 classes, then one of the specific indices of a marginalized area has been attained (MINISTERUL EDUCAȚIEI, 2013).

In the six communities under analysis, the minimum threshold is largely attained, with an average value of 61.35% in female respondents with an education level of maximum 8 classes. Therefore, 28.77% of the respondents having graduated at most the gymnasial cycle are women (37.2% of the whole number of female respondents), while the ratio of men in this category represents 32.58% of the whole number of respondents. In other words, the number of men who graduated maximum 8 classes is higher than that of women, who, as one may observe, are more educated than men. Even when considering: 1. the level of lyceal, professional or apprenticeship studies, women represent 17.23% of the respondents, comparatively with 15.39% - the ratio of men; 2. the post-lyceum level of study, 1.34%, of the respondents are women, and 0.36% - men; 3. high education level, 2.17% women and 2.15% - men. Therefore, the number of women who attended at least a lyceal,

professional or apprenticeship form of education is 2.84% higher than of the men from the same category.

### **Employment in marginalized rural communities**

Amartya Sen (2000) considers that a significant social exclusion example is the lack of long-term engagement, highlighting that, *indeed, in the contemporary Europe the extraordinary prevalence of the lack of employment is perhaps the only important determinant fact of the persistence of social exclusion on a large scale* (SEN, 2000). The *Social Policy in the EU – Reform Barometer 2016*, mentions the continuing need to increase the number of women employed in most European countries, except for the Nordic countries, that already have a high level of employment when it comes to women. The focus is mainly on the countries from Southern Europe, where the situation is much more serious (DE GEUS et al., 2016). The consequences of the lack of employment, besides the loss of the monthly income, are devastating and they include the wastage of production capacity, the loss of abilities and competencies due to the lack of practice, the loss of freedom and social exclusion, physical and mental damage, poverty, the weakening of social values, inequality and even illness or death caused by the needs that a person who does not have any income is confronted with as well as the stress caused by these deficiencies (SEN, 2000). Although there is a high degree of awareness of the repercussions the lack of employment has on the society, only two out of five experts consider that reforms have been implemented in order to improve this indicator regarding women, and this observation is true for all European Union states, no matter the level of employment among women (DE GEUS et al., 2016).

Considering the effects that the employment level has on the goods of a certain community, the variable was included on a list of indicators that have to be analysed before being able to regard a community as marginalized. The minimum threshold for the lack of employment is 22.5% of the total population aged 16-64, including people who are not formally employed (employees with labour contract or who officially work on their own, with or without employees

- company owner or administrator, authorized person, individual company, freelancer) and who is not enrolled in any form of education (The applicant's guide - specific conditions. "Integrated Local Development within the marginalized communities," Priority axis 4: Social inclusion and the fight against poverty, POCU 2014-2020).

Analysing gender we notice that women, although they have a higher level of education, when it comes to employment they are at a disadvantage in comparison to men, only 7,79% of the female respondents being employed, which is 2,66% less than men, reporting the analysis to the total number of respondents. When we take into account each gender category separately, only 5.7% of the female respondents are employed, while 33.12% of the male respondents have this status. Taking into account that the number of female respondents was twice than that of the male respondents (a total of 314 women and 141 men), the difference level regarding employment is more clearly presented by the results reported for each category. Therefore we notice a clear disadvantage among women regarding this aspect. Moreover, according to this survey, employment does not trigger a consistent monthly income that would completely reduce economic problems. Therefore, at the general level, without taking the gender variable into account, the correlation between the socio-economic status of being employed and the monthly net income over 1000 lei is not a very high one ( $R = 0.481$ ), which means that not all employees have an income higher than 1000 lei. Women contribute to this poor correlation, which is relatively poor between an income of over 1000 lei and being employed ( $R = 0.451$ ). Higher education does not ensure employment, although the correlation between the two is higher in the case of women ( $R = 0.405$ ) than in the case of men ( $R = 0.235$ ). If higher education is somewhat connected with an income of over 1000 lei in the case of men ( $R = 0.478$ ), in the case of the female respondents higher education does not ensure an income level of over 1000 lei, the correlation between the two variables being only 0.291. These results strengthen the need identified by the *Social Policy in the EU - Reform Barometer 2016*, which states that a weakness of our country is

that connected to the in-work poverty, together with the large number of employees who earn a very low monthly income (DE GEUS et al. 2016). Therefore, employment does not represent a sure way of getting rid of poverty and social exclusion (LANGBAKK, 2016). These shortcomings should be taken into account and eventually fixed using different employee protection measures. Poverty is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon and it cannot be explained only using economic terms. It extends its scope towards other civil, social and political areas, also conditioning social mobility (Council of the European Union, 2007). This phenomenon has more severe negative effects when it comes to women in comparison to men (LANGBAKK, 2016). The above results confirm the findings from the *Poverty, gender and intersecting inequalities in the EU* report, which support the high degree of disadvantage of women in comparison to men on several socio-economic levels, leading to more poverty and, therefore, to a socio-economic dependence to men (LANGBAKK, 2016).

### **The main problems identified by the respondents**

Despite the fact that only 7.79% of the women from the total number of respondents are employed, only 25.47% of them consider that one of the important problems they are confronted with is the fact that they don't have a job. Therefore, the statement that job accessibility for women from the rural areas represents a desideratum so that they can gain a higher level of independence from their men was not confirmed by the answers received. The normal question is: *why do women behave in this way? What makes the majority of women think that the lack of a job does not represent a problem and therefore they do not plan to get hired? Are there certain familial or social obstacles that prevent them from having a job?* Behavioural economics mainly focuses on the fact that although a person's behaviour does not always correspond to the standard principle of rationality, it has a predictable character and therefore it can be influenced (STIGLITZ, 2013). Apparently, two hypotheses could be put forward: either they are limited to this situation and consider that it is impossible to find a job, or the household chores

are much too difficult and no one could replace their long absence from home (e.g. many children, lots of animals, marriage problems, the husband's lack of involvement etc.). In order to strengthen the above mentioned aspects, the *Poverty, gender and intersecting inequalities in the EU* report presents the fact that 50% of women living in poverty are not active on the labour market because of the responsibilities towards their household and children (LANGBAKK, 2016).

In the case of the analysed marginalized rural communities, inhabitants are faced with the following main problems (Fig. 2):

- The lack of a job;
- Economic difficulties;
- A limited access to various jobs;
- A limited access to medical services;
- Living problems;
- A limited access to social services;
- The lack of educational opportunities.

It is surprising that only 14,28% of women regard economic difficulties as problems. Given the fact that only 10,72% of them state that their monthly income is above 1000 lei, and 58,59% state that their monthly income is lower than 400 lei we consider that the percentage of women, but also of men (on the whole, 27,1% women and men from the total number of respondents) who do not regard economic difficulties as the main problem is much lower than the real level of the percentage of respondents who are directly confronted with this problem. From our point of view, there are two possible answers to this issue. Therefore, either the respondents are not fully aware of what the economic difficulties really mean, not having a certain level of well-being they can relate to, considering that their standard of living is normal, or they are stopped by some socio-psychological barriers which do not allow them to openly admit the fact that they are faced with economic difficulties.

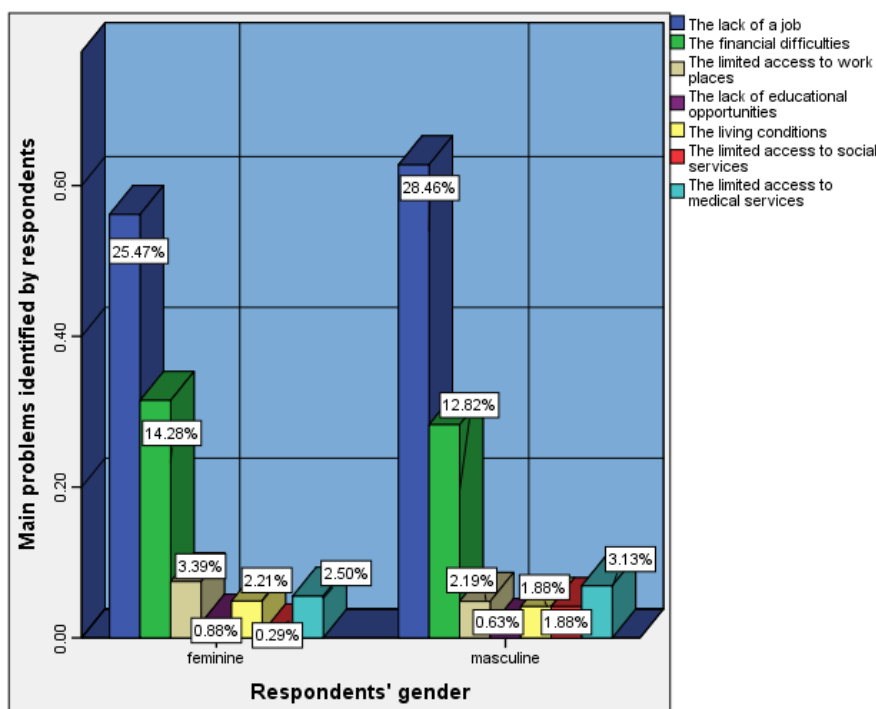


Fig. 2. The main problems identified by the respondents

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The circumstances and the effort are essential aspects that have to be analysed when we want to explain some individual behaviours or actions

(ROEMER, 1993). There is not only a one-way influence, the individual's specific behaviours and actions represent a combination of personal, environmental and contextual factors that are correlated and are materialized in the personal reasoning, which together with skills and

motivation lead towards a specific and personal behaviour. Therefore, on the one side, any inequalities which come from the effort that an individual puts in (skills, competencies and other personal factors) belong to his own judgement and personal choices, and this is why the individual is the only one responsible for his own well-being. On the other side, the circumstances that directly determine these inequalities "are not acceptable and have to be eradicated," and lead to "a waste in the productive potential and an inefficient allocation of resources, undermining economic efficiency." Stiglitz (2013) draws attention to the fact that *no one can succeed by himself*, stating the fact that poverty is not only triggered by a lack of the will to work or the skills and competencies of some society members, but also by the fact that these people carry out their activity in *an economy that does not work properly*.

Likewise, one should state the fact that realities differ from one individual to the other, from one community to the other, from region to region, and from country to country, depending on various socio-cultural characteristics, starting from those specific to the individual (age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity etc.), continuing with elements related to the socio-cultural context of the community or region where the individual lives and ending up with the status of the macroeconomic environment of the country. All these aspects influence, either positively or negatively, the individual's trajectory. For women it is much harder to leave the community they belong to. Starting from these considerations, we assumed some hypotheses that were validated or not using a survey conducted in rural areas. The main conclusions are presented as following:

- only 5.7% of women respondents are employed.
- 7.56% of them have a monthly income over 1000 lei;
- 25.47% of women from the total number of respondents consider that the main problem they are confronted with is the lack of a job;
- The correlation ration between the socio-economic employee status and the monthly income of over 1000 lei is not very high ( $R=0.451$ ) in the case of women, which means that

not all employees have an income higher than 1000 lei.

- Higher education does not ensure finding a job, the connection between the two being higher in the case of women ( $R=0.405$ ) than in the case of men ( $R=0.235$ ).
- If higher education is somewhat connected with income of over 1000 lei in the case of men ( $R=0.478$ ), in the case of women respondents, higher education does not ensure the same income level of over 1000lei, with a correlation ration between the two variables of only 0.291.

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## Endnotes

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1. Blumberg (1991) describes a general framework, frequently occurring mainly in poor families, in which the woman is obliged to spend all her income for the basic needs of the house, whereas the man has the tendency to consume the largest part of his income for his own desires. Guhathakurta and Bhatia (1992) also mention that, in many situations, men spend their money on alcohol, gambling and other personal options.
2. Early school leaving is still a persistent problem in Romania, the rates over the past 5 years being significantly higher than the target of the 2020 Europe Strategy. This continued to grow in 2015 and has the third highest value from the European Union. Rural students, poor families and Roma are particularly exposed to the risk of school dropout and educational poverty (Education and Training Monitor 2016).