

## **GENDER EQUALITY AS A DETERMINING FACTOR IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA**

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**Abstract:** Sustainable development represents one of the most important strategic directions of contemporary society, being founded on three essential pillars: economic progress, environmental protection, and social equity. Within this integrative concept, gender equality holds a central place, not only as a distinct objective of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but also as a cross-cutting element that directly influences all other objectives. In the context of the Republic of Moldova, the issue of gender equality gains particular relevance, especially in rural areas. Rural communities account for more than half of the country's population and, therefore, represent a fundamental component of the national socio-economic structure.

However, disparities between urban and rural areas remain significant, both in terms of access to resources and services, and in terms of participation in economic, educational and decision-making life. Women in rural areas frequently face limited employment opportunities, lower incomes, disproportionate household responsibilities and low participation in local decision-making. In addition, the persistence of gender stereotypes and traditional norms contributes to the perpetuation of inequalities and the slowdown of social progress. In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has made significant progress in terms of the normative and institutional framework for gender equality. The lack of supporting infrastructure (kindergartens, community centers, counseling services) and external migration, which strongly affects rural areas, amplify the vulnerability of communities and limit the impact of the measures adopted.

This article aims to analyze the role of gender equality as a determining factor in the sustainable development of rural communities in the Republic of Moldova.

**Keywords:** gender inequality, discrimination, poverty, social exclusion

**JEL Classification:** J16

### **1. Introduction**

Sustainable development is one of the most important strategic directions of contemporary society, being founded on three essential pillars: economic progress, environmental protection and social equity. Within this integrative concept, gender equality occupies a central place, not only as a distinct objective of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations, but also as a cross-cutting element, which directly influences all other objectives. Specifically, Sustainable Development Goal No. 5 (Gender Equality) promotes the idea that the empowerment of women and ensuring equal opportunities between women and men constitute indispensable premises for the creation of balanced, prosperous and resilient communities. In parallel, Goal No. 11 (Sustainable Communities) emphasizes the importance of developing local communities, and

the link between these two dimensions highlights the essential role of gender equality in the process of building a sustainable society.

In the context of the Republic of Moldova, the issue of gender equality acquires increased relevance, particularly in rural areas. Rural communities account for more than half of the country's population and, therefore, represent a fundamental element of the national socio-economic structure. According to the final results of the 2024 census, 53.6% of the population of the Republic of Moldova resides in villages (rural areas).

However, disparities between urban and rural areas remain significant, both in terms of access to resources and services, and in terms of participation in economic, educational and decision-making life. Women in rural areas frequently face limited employment opportunities, lower incomes, disproportionate household responsibilities and low participation in local decision-making. In addition, the persistence of gender stereotypes and traditional norms contributes to the perpetuation of inequalities and the slowdown of social progress. In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has made significant progress in the normative and institutional framework for gender equality. There are laws and public policies that promote the equitable participation of women and men in all spheres of social and economic life. However, the implementation of these policies faces major difficulties, especially in rural areas, where administrative, economic and human resources are often insufficient. The lack of support infrastructure (kindergartens, community centers, counseling services) and external migration, which strongly affects rural areas, amplify the vulnerability of communities and limit the impact of the measures adopted.

Gender equality, in this perspective, should not be viewed only as a moral value or a social desideratum, but as a determining factor of sustainable development. Numerous international studies have demonstrated that the active involvement of women in the economy, agriculture, education and community life increases social cohesion, reduces poverty and accelerates modernization. In the rural areas of the Republic of Moldova, where agriculture remains the main economic activity, women's access to productive resources (land, credit, technologies) is essential for increasing competitiveness and strengthening food security. At the same time, the presence of women in local decision-making positions brings new perspectives on community governance and ensures a more equitable use of resources.

Thus, this article aims to analyze the role of gender equality as a determining factor in the sustainable development of rural communities in the Republic of Moldova. The objectives of the research are:

1. Highlighting the particularities of the gender situation in rural areas of the Republic of Moldova;
2. Identifying the challenges and structural barriers that limit the equitable participation of women and men;
3. Analyzing the correlation between gender equality and the socio-economic progress of rural communities;
4. Formulating recommendations for sustainable policies and practices aimed at contributing to the balanced and sustainable development of these communities.

For a more in-depth analysis of the given topic, well-known bibliographic sources, some studies conducted by civil society representatives, as well as factual data from the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova were used.

## **2. Gender equality versus sustainable development**

The concept of gender equality is based on the idea that women and men should enjoy the same rights, opportunities and responsibilities in all areas of life – economic, social, political and cultural. Beyond the normative and moral dimension, the specialized literature highlights the fact that gender equality is a necessary condition for achieving sustainable development. In this sense, numerous authors (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 2005; World Bank, 2012) emphasize that development

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cannot be considered sustainable if half of the population is marginalized or if its participation is limited to traditional spheres.

Globally, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly recognizes the link between gender equality and sustainability, enshrining Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and integrating its principles into the other goals. International studies demonstrate that women's involvement in the economy and decision-making processes contributes to better use of resources, reducing inequalities and increasing social cohesion (UNDP, 2020; OECD, 2021). In rural areas, where resources are limited and dependence on agriculture is high, gender equality has a direct impact on the productivity and competitiveness of communities. Din punct de vedere teoretic, există mai multe abordări care analizează relația dintre egalitatea de gen și dezvoltarea durabilă:

1. The fundamental rights approach, according to which gender equality is an inalienable human right and must be ensured through legal and institutional mechanisms. This perspective is supported by international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979).

2. The economic development approach, which argues that gender equality increases labor market participation, increases household incomes, and reduces poverty. The World Bank (2012) shows that countries that promote gender equality experience faster economic growth.

3. The community sustainability approach, which highlights the role of women in strengthening social cohesion, transmitting educational values, and ensuring a balance between economic development and environmental protection. In rural areas, women are often the guardians of agricultural traditions, but also promoters of community innovations. As for the Republic of Moldova, the existing literature reveals a number of major challenges related to gender equality. Studies conducted by UN Women Moldova (2021), the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection (2022) and relevant non-governmental organizations emphasize that, despite legislative progress, rural women continue to have limited access to economic resources (agricultural land, credits, counseling services), face higher levels of poverty and have limited representation in local decision-making structures. At the same time, traditional gender stereotypes perpetuate a rigid division of social roles, which directly affects women's chances to contribute to the development of their communities.

Another aspect highlighted in the literature is the link between external migration and changing gender dynamics in rural areas. The massive departure of men to work abroad has led women to take on additional responsibilities both in the household and in the community. This phenomenon, although generating challenges, can also be seen as an opportunity to strengthen the role of women in rural development (Lupan, 2019). In conclusion, the review of the specialized literature confirms that gender equality is a fundamental element of sustainable development, and rural communities that equitably capitalize on the potential of women and men are more resilient, more innovative and more prosperous. However, the reality in the Republic of Moldova shows that there are still significant gaps between theoretical principles and their practical application, which justifies the need for in-depth analyses and more effective policies to reduce inequalities.

Gender equality is not only a principle of social equity, but a fundamental element of sustainable development in the Republic of Moldova, especially in rural areas, where communities face complex challenges: massive migration, poverty, limited access to resources and poor infrastructure. Analysis of data and realities on the ground shows that reducing gender inequalities generates visible impacts both economically, socially and culturally.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, over 53.6% of the population of the Republic of Moldova lives in rural areas, and women represent a significant part of the agricultural workforce. However, the majority of them work in the subsistence agricultural sector or in family households, where their work is neither paid nor recorded. For example, many women are involved

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in animal husbandry, gardening, or food processing for their own family consumption, without being officially registered as participants in the economy.

Where women have access to agricultural land and credit for small business development, the results are visibly different: the respective households increase their productivity, manage to sell products on the local market and contribute to diversifying family incomes. Concrete examples can be observed in districts such as Ungheni, Orhei or Cahul, where programs supported by international organizations (UNDP, UN Women, IFAD) have allowed women to initiate small agricultural businesses or develop cooperatives. This experience demonstrates that women's involvement not only supplements household incomes, but also transforms the entire community into a more economically resilient space.

The educational level of rural women is a critical factor for sustainable development. Even though in recent years, the percentage of girls completing high school is higher than that of boys, there is a barrier at the university and postgraduate levels. The main reasons are economic migration, family responsibilities and lack of financial resources.

However, a positive trend is observed: women's participation in vocational training and education programs. For example, through projects implemented by USAID and the Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Moldova, many women in villages have benefited from entrepreneurship training and have started small businesses — bakeries, tailoring workshops, rural guesthouses. The interpretation of this phenomenon shows that education is not only a condition for individual success, but a driver for the transformation of communities. An educated and financially independent woman becomes an inspiring model for other women and contributes to reducing poverty at the local level.

Women's involvement in community life and decision-making - a particularly important aspect for sustainable development is women's participation in decision-making. In the Republic of Moldova, the number of women mayors has increased in recent years, reaching approximately 22% at the national level, according to data from the Central Electoral Commission. However, in many villages, women continue to be poorly represented in local councils or in the leadership of public associations.

Analysis of cases where there is a more balanced presence between women and men in local public administration shows tangible results: more investments in social infrastructure (kindergartens, schools, community centers), local policies more sensitive to the needs of vulnerable groups (children, the elderly, people with disabilities) and better management of community resources. These examples confirm that gender equality in decision-making is not just a symbolic act, but has direct consequences on the quality of life in rural areas.

Social perceptions and stereotypes - a major obstacle to gender equality is traditional mentalities. In many villages, women's roles are still seen as predominantly domestic, which limits their involvement in public life. Even women in leadership positions often face prejudice or lack of trust from the community.

These stereotypes hinder development, as they do not allow the community to fully realize its human potential. For example, when a woman is not encouraged to run for mayor, the village loses a potential leadership resource. Changing these perceptions requires time, but also consistent interventions: information campaigns, civic education and the involvement of young people in community activities.

The economic and social impact of gender equality - comparing rural communities where women are active in decision-making and entrepreneurship with those where their participation is reduced, clear differences are observed. In the first case, there are more rural tourism initiatives, ecological businesses or agricultural cooperatives that create jobs and attract investment. In the second case, dependence on remittances from abroad, lack of opportunities and continuous migration of the young population prevail.

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This contrast demonstrates that gender equality is a determining factor for sustainable development: the involvement of women leads to the diversification of the local economy, better social cohesion and reduced vulnerability of rural communities.

Interpretation in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) The Republic of Moldova has undertaken the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and SDG 5 — “Gender Equality” — is directly linked to other relevant objectives for the rural environment: poverty reduction (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). Promoting gender equality is not an isolated policy, but a condition for achieving all other objectives.

In rural areas, gender equality thus becomes a prerequisite for sustainability: it ensures better use of resources, increases living standards, reduces emigration and contributes to strengthening communities.

An in-depth analysis of the theme Gender equality as a determining factor in the sustainable development of rural communities in the Republic of Moldova highlights the fact that promoting an equitable environment between women and men is essential for achieving the sustainable development goals. Despite the progress made, significant challenges persist that require strategic and sustained interventions.

### **3. Progress and challenges in the field of gender equality**

The Republic of Moldova has made notable progress in reducing gender gaps. According to a recent report, the country has reduced its gender gap by 81.3%, registering an increase in the score by +0.023 points compared to 2024. This improvement was reflected in the area of political participation, where Moldova’s score increased by 7.5 percentage points, reaching 42.5% in 2025, placing the country among the world leaders in terms of gender equality [2]. Despite this progress, rural communities in Moldova face significant obstacles to achieving real gender equality. Studies show that rural women have limited access to financial resources and advisory services, and traditional gender norms continue to negatively influence their participation in decision-making. There is also a concentration of women in informal forms of organization, such as peasant households, which restricts their access to finance and modern technologies.

Gender inequalities have a direct impact on the sustainable development of rural communities. Women who lack access to quality education, adequate health services and economic opportunities are less able to contribute to the economic and social development of their communities. The lack of representation of women in leadership structures also limits decision-making diversity and can lead to less inclusive and equitable public policies.

#### **Conclusions and recommendations**

To address these challenges and promote equitable sustainable development, the following measures are recommended:

**Integrating gender into public policies:** It is essential that all development policies and programs include specific objectives and measures to promote gender equality, with monitoring indicators disaggregated by sex.

**Accessibility to finance for women:** Creating subsidy and grant schemes dedicated to women farmers, with specific budget allocations, to address gender gaps in access to finance.

**Education and vocational training:** Developing and implementing educational and vocational training programs specifically targeting rural women, to enhance their skills and facilitate their integration into the labor market.

**Awareness-raising and changing social norms:** Conducting awareness-raising campaigns to change traditional perceptions of gender roles and promote a social climate that supports equal opportunities.

Gender equality is a fundamental pillar of the sustainable development of rural communities in the Republic of Moldova. Building an equitable and prosperous society requires a continuous

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commitment from authorities, international organizations and the community at large. Only by implementing gender-sensitive public policies and promoting an inclusive and equitable environment can real sustainable development be ensured that benefits the entire population, regardless of gender.

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