

# STEREOTYPES, GENDER AND THE CONCILIATION OF WORK WITH FAMILY AND PRIVATE LIFE

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**Abstract:** *Without taking discussions to extremes and without minimizing the roles that we all have in society, this article is a case study, made inside a company, to identify some trends, regarding the reconciliation of the private life with work. In the recent years, including the period before the adhesion of Romania to the UE and after 2007, there have been many pressures of creating a legislative and a policy framework, which could offer equal chances in all domains of activity. The domain of interest in gender equality is represented by the reconciliation between work, family and private life. The European policies regarding the equality of chances aim not only towards a formal equality of the rights and towards the discrimination combat, but also towards integrating the gender perspective in all community policies, regardless of their application field. Thus, in the UE legislation, related to the equality of chances, there is an emphasis on 2 major interventions areas: the increase in the participation rate of women in the labour market and the improvement of the working conditions for women. The second major area comprises the access to certain domains, the issue of better paid jobs and the reconciliation of professional and private life.*

**Keywords:** reconciliation, gender, equal work/equal payment, segregation, career, parental leave

## Introduction

The equality of chances, which is defined as the freedom of every human being, to choose and develop its own capacities, without limitations or constraints given by the roles imposition, takes into consideration the different needs and aspirations of men and women, assessing and favoring them equally.

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Inevitably the discussions regarding the equality of chances include aspects related to the relevance of the gender issue or of discrimination, as well as that of the integrating approach of gender equality. In some of the feminist speeches, there are mentioned some important aspects from history, related to the equality of chances issue, which turned the power of decision scale towards men. Thus, a discussed cause is that of the woman's image inside the Church, her description and the roles, which she has to fulfill. The religious writings describe the woman, from the beginning, as inferior to the man, which has always limited the possibility of women to aim for certain positions. The author Walker G. Barbara, in her book, *The woman's Encyclopedia of myths and secrets*, while analyzing the image of woman from the biblical writings and from the Church canons point of view, came to the conclusion that the theologians, the priests and the husbands managed, across the centuries, to convince themselves and the women, that the woman's role is that of being inferior to the man. Martin Luther said in his book that "God created Adam, the master of all creatures, but Eve ruined everything. Women have to stay at home, to take care of the household and to give birth to children. And if a woman gets tired and dies while giving birth, it does not matter. She should die, due to giving birth, because she exists for that." Therefore, because women are always related to obedience and their options are limited, the feminist movements always bring into discussion the discrimination issue.

Discrimination means differentiating people, situations or cases or treating them differently, when there is no relevant distinction between them, or, on the contrary, it means treating different situations as being identical (Boudon et al., 1996). The UE anti-discrimination directives forbid both the direct and the indirect discrimination.

It is essential, when it comes to the integrating approach of gender equality, to emphasize the elaborating processes of policies. This issue refers to the organization of usual procedures and regulations and to the reorganization of the responsibilities and capacities, with the purpose of integrating the gender perspective, in all these procedures, regulations, responsibilities and capacities. Also there is an emphasis on the fact that the gender dimension has to be included into the elaboration and the planning of the public policies, that an analysis regarding the gender impact in the processes has to be used and that consulting and relevant groups and organization participation, has to be included, to support the implementing of the gender equality. It is considered that only when all these conditions are fulfilled, we can say that the process of the integrating approach is in the course of being achieved.

### **The UE and national legislation regarding the gender equality issue**

The equality between men and women is a fundamental right. It is considered to be an essential instrument in achieving the UE objectives of economical raise, of occupying job positions, of prosperity, of increased competitiveness and of social cohesion. Thus, these aspects refer to: the access to jobs, the salaries equality, the maternity leave, the parental leave, the process of making decisions, the

reconciliation between work, family and private life, the social and professional insurance, the social inclusion and security, the structural funds, education and training, cooperation development, gender violence and human trafficking (<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&langId=en&newsId=1296&furthe rNews=yes>).

One of the domains of interest regarding the gender equality is represented by the reconciliation between work, family and private life. It is considered necessary to interfere with gender sensible policies, because they are important when it comes to creating and maintaining the equality between men and women. Thus, these policies should refer not only to women, (GEO 96/2003), but also to men. It is also important that the legislations should be mixed and to take into consideration their consequences on individuals' lives and on their participation in the labour market.

The equality of chances in the Romanian national and community legislation is reflected in the GEO no. 61/2008, regarding the implementation of the equality of treatment between women and men, when it comes to goods and services and the supply of goods and services, through the principle of treatment equality, which states that there would be no direct discrimination based on sex criteria, including the appliance of a less favorable treatment to women due to pregnancy or maternity and that there would not be any indirect discrimination, based on the sex criteria. This issue is also present in the Law no. 202/2002, regarding the equality of chances between women and men, republished, which states that people of both genders should be treated equally, and that the capacities, needs and aspirations of both men and women should be taken into consideration (Gal & Kligman, 2003).

During the communist period, work was compulsory by law and by the needs of the "new Socialist disposal" and people were pride that they had a job (Stanomir, 2005). Thus, women entered the labour market. We can say that women had certain social and economical advantages, but the final result was the reinforcement and the creation of a new dimension of the Romanian traditional patriarchy. The Romanian communist state gave women the right to work, but it did not create a legislation framework, which could protect their needs, so the large number of working women soon became just a figure in the state statistics.

The period after 1989 represented a turbid period, with intense changes in the political field and in the social and economic area (Zamfir, 2004). The labour market made no exception. The following transformations, the collapse in the state industrial sector, the reorganizations, the privatizations and the appearance of the big corporations, correlated with the numerous legislation changes, all had an effect on almost the entire population.

The European policies regarding the equality of chances aim not only towards a formal equality of the rights and towards the discrimination combat, but also towards integrating the gender perspective in all community policies, regardless of their application field. Thus, in the UE legislation, related to the equality of

chances, there is an emphasis on 2 major intervention areas: the increase in the participation rate of women in the labour market and the improvement of the working conditions for women. The second major area comprises the access to certain domains, the issue of better paid jobs and the reconciliation of professional and private life.

When it comes to women's access to better paid domains and jobs, some aspects related to the income differences between women and men must be taken into consideration. There are some situations in which the income differences come from the fact that they are applied to equal work, or there might be a decreased level in the women's income, which explains the issue of occupational segregation (Heintz, 2005).

“The women's occupational segregation still persists and it is proved by the existence of models for differences in occupations according to sex, which determines the income disparities, even if the principle of **equal work, equal payment** is already legally consecrated. One may observe that in general, feminized occupations are worse paid” ([www.anes.ro](http://www.anes.ro)).

There is a horizontal segregation, represented by the preference of hiring men and women for different occupations, which led to feminized fields, with less payment and smaller incomes (for example the personnel from the textile industry or from the education field, which is predominant feminine).

In her book, “Drumul către autonomie” (The road towards autonomy), Mihaela Miroiu (2004) tries to find explanations for the reasons that led to this horizontal segregation. There are some historical explanations, according to which women worked in certain fields, losing their social value, in time. There are also some socializing reasons, which imply the assuming of the traditional gender role by women, which pushes them towards “care taking” jobs. Nevertheless, we also have to take into consideration the fact that it was always difficult for women to accede and to advance in a male field and that they also estimate the costs and benefits, when choosing a career. Thus, women might avoid certain jobs because it is difficult for them to get a certain position or because they think of the differences of income.

In general, segregation starts when people enter the educational stages. One can observe a major difference in the educational trajectory options, between women and men, the last choosing mainly technical fields. Once they made their decisions, all people accept the hierarchy regarding the incomes and the social prestige.

The vertical segregation is the tendency of hiring women and men, in different positions, in the same field or profession. Thus, one may observe the reduced access of women in leading positions, for example, due to the supposition that women are less available to invest time and resources, to advance from the professional point of view, because they allocate much time to their family and to their private life.

There is also an employers' preference for hiring men, due to the simple calculation regarding the anticipated time spent by women in the working field, because of their private life decisions, which can affect their professional life, such as the maternity leave. Nevertheless both situations take into consideration the costs and benefits, but also the gender stereotypes ([www.gobookee.org/economics-of-women-men-and-work](http://www.gobookee.org/economics-of-women-men-and-work)). Even if apparently this kind of segregation might seem easier to combat, through different laws, which can prevent and sanction discrimination, these things are very subtle and it's difficult to identify and prove them.

“The Romanian concept that a woman may have a career usually intrigues people and it is almost scandalous. This thing troubles the traditional custom of believing that the natural place in which a woman has to show her personality is “by the stove”, taking care of children and cooking lunch, or in an aphrodisiac depiction, equally pictured in the native imaginary. But a woman who has a career is absent from these two mythical alternative pictures, with which women may fatally identify themselves” (Palade, 1998).

The reconciliation policies are those which directly support the issue of combining the professional, private and family life and they want to offer some facilities when taking care of children, such as maternity/paternity and parental leaves, the possibility of having a flexible schedule and some fiscal facilities for parents and families, such as tax and child support deductions.

“In Romania, on the labour market, the entrepreneurs prefer hiring men, because they assume that women will leave the labour market earlier, therefore implying larger costs, due to pregnancy or getting married (consequently pregnant women have more difficulties when hired) or due to the fact that because of the large amount of domestic work, their professional efficiency is considered to be lower” (Teşiu, 2004).

But actually men and women do not allocate the same amount of time on the professional and household activities, women still being responsible with all the house chores. Thus, a comparative study, made in the UE, in 2007, shows the following:

**Table 1.** *The structure of chores sharing in Europe*

Country	Cleaning			Cooking			Clothes ironing		
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T
<i>M=Man F=Female T= Total answers "me"</i>									
Sweden	19%	62%	40%	21%	66%	43%	12%	71%	41%
Italy	11%	85%	47%	12%	87%	48%	6%	85%	44%
Poland	9%	80%	44%	11%	81%	46%	9%	85%	46%
Hungary	7%	85%	44%	8%	86%	45%	7%	89%	46%
Romania	5%	79%	41%	4%	85%	44%	3%	90%	46%

The UE has showed its interest regarding the reconciliation of work, private life and family since the 1980s. Thus, the reconciliation policies have had an important role in the past years, also due to the changes regarding the demography, the family structure and those related to the labour market. There is an aspect that must not be ignored, that of the equality model inside families, given by the implication of men in the house chores and when it comes to raising children. It is considered that the reconciliation policies have to “encourage the fathers’ and the male partners’ active participation, when it comes to the usage of the existent flexible schedule options and to the assuming of household and family responsibilities.” (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/>).

The European reconciliation policies take into consideration the examples of participation in the labour market and the rate of fertility. The women’s involvement in the labour market is influenced by their role of taking care of children and of other members of their families and by the difficulties, they encounter, in making a balance between their work and family, issues that are directly reflected in the women’s hiring rates. But we have to mention that there isn’t a negative correlation between the fertility rate and the participation in the labour market.

The choice of being or not a parent influences both the women’s and men’s behaviour, because women who don’t have children have a bigger rate of employment, than the ones who have children (women are more affected by maternity in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic), while men without children have a smaller rate of employment, compared with those who have children. The choice also depends on the offered facilities, such as schedule flexibility, the possibility of having a part time job or the option of having public or private care taking services benefits.

The traditional gender roles and the stereotypes have a strong influence on assuming and making the care taking activities. For example, in Hungary, mothers have a maternity leave of maximum 3 years. Thus, there is a debate on the utility and necessity of baby nurseries. Poland, a country which has strong traditional values, assures a period of 3 years for mothers to raise and educate their children. The majority of women in this culture consider that the choice of returning to work, earlier than after 3 years, is less acceptable. In this case, also, parents prefer the informal child care alternatives, such as grandparents or close relatives.

When it comes to the working schedule flexibility, this depends on the internal policies of employers, in most cases. The present legislation presents the maternity leave period as the minimum recommended for the child raising leave. Recent legislative changes state that fathers should also have minimum a month of child raising leave, until the child turns 2, or in the case of children with disabilities, until they turn 3. To encourage the reintegration of women in the working field, the legislation offers a benefit to the mothers, who choose to go back to work, earlier, from the child raising leave, called the reinsertion benefit.

The factors which influence the partners' choice to take a parental leave are, on one hand, the payment level (in general, care taking leave wages are larger for the people with larger incomes) and on the other hand, the organizational culture, the schedule flexibility, the working field (there is a tendency that people who work in the public field, to take the entire period of child care taking leave) and last, but not least, the level of education (men with a higher education level have a higher tendency to take a parental leave, while women with a higher education level, go back to work earlier than those with a lower one.)

This tendency may be observed in the case of those women who have leading positions inside certain companies. In this case, the possibility of a part time schedule is almost inexistent and the option of dividing a position, with someone, considerably diminishes the possibility of advancing at a hierarchic level. Also, the existence of an over time schedule organization culture represents a setback in the reconciliation policies way.

## Methods

In the following part, I am going to present some issues that, under certain aspects, might be considered as good practice examples, regarding the modality of conciliating the professional, the family and the private life, inside a multinational company.

This company entered the Romanian market in 1997, when it bought one of the home appliances factories, from Satu Mare. Its headquarters is in Sweden. Thus, almost predictably, its entire organizational culture is strongly influenced by the Swedish culture.

The group policy starts from the principle that special people create special results. The group policy also reckons that the best results come from people, who have demanding tasks and who are appropriately trained by managers. These are people who accept and use feedbacks and who participate in trainings, to develop their abilities.

To make this possible, a method of gratification people for their efforts is used, to assure a healthy and optimal development of people and of the company. The career development is an individual responsibility of every employee, which they share with the employer company. This means that every person is responsible for the development of their team and of their career. It also implies that the managers have to create an environment in which the employees can freely make their performance, in which they can be trained, can receive feedbacks and in which they can have an open dialogue, regarding their future. In turn, every individual is responsible with his personal development, by searching new challenges and by actively managing his career plans. The long term visions are made by continuously establishing objectives and through the deliverability. The company process of objectives establishing is represented by an annual analysis of each employee, a process which implies some objectives establishment, the identifying and the

exploring of common interests of career development and during which the received feedback is being discussed.

The company also has a code of conduct, with several chapters related to the issues of discrimination, harassment and abuse. The managers are responsible for its implementation and they have to inform employees regarding their rights, obligations and responsibilities stipulated in this code of conduct. The group acknowledges and respects the culture differences. Nevertheless, all employees will be strictly treated, according to their abilities or their qualifications, when it comes to taking professional decisions, including issues such as hiring, promotion, compensation, benefits, training, dismissal and the termination of the working contracts.

This case study is meant to identify how much the national level trends are present in the analyzed situation. Thus, some partly structured interviews were taken from the people who wanted to benefit from a child care taking leave in the period August-October 2013. From a total of 900 employees, there were 4 people, 2 women and 2 men, in the period of reference, who requested the suspension of the individual working contract, due to the above mentioned reason. Also, to make things clear, there were also some discussions with the company managers and with the union leader, these people being factors of decisions, when it comes to the employees' policy of benefits and compensations.

## **Results**

The questionnaire followed 4 important aspects: the choice motivation, impressions about the company policy, the legislation knowledge, related to this issue and the possible solutions to conciliate the private and the professional life. The analyzed documents were the collective working contract and the existent policies.

According to the corporation, the basic values which are related to the human resources are mutual respect and diversity, as well as good professional ethics and integrity. Starting from these, the created policies also include desirable behaviors expected from their employees, such as: mutual respect and equality between individuals, the lack of prejudice and for them to work in different teams, according to their knowledge, to the expertise and geographical areas, which transposes into a higher sensibility to a multicultural environment, the behavior of employees being also incorruptible, transparent and correct.

When it comes to the collective working contract, the most important analyzed aspects were: The working schedule (working hours and leave), the maternity protection (GEO 96/2003), the benefits and compensations if an employee has a new born child. Thus, there is a flexibility possibility concerning the administrative personnel category, which only stipulates between which hours the employees have to be at work. In most cases the resting leave period is above the one stipulated in the Code of Work (Law 53/2003). Furthermore, employees may benefit of days off for special events, apart from the leave days. For the employees who have



children up to 7 years old, if they are ill, the parents can benefit of up to 7 days off, for the treatment of each child. The company also offers financial support for the birth of each of the employees' children. If a mother goes back to work, before the maximum period of 2 years, she can have a shorter working schedule (Law 319/2006 and GEO 111/2010).

The discussions with the managerial team and with the union leader confirmed that there is a preoccupation for the private and working life reconciliation issue. The facilities offered by the company have the purpose of reintegrating the people with *familial responsibilities*, in a period of time as short as possible, bearing in mind both the employees' benefits (a short period of absence from the working field doesn't require an in-depth updating of the knowledge and the period of adaptation with the job is reduced), but also the employer's benefits, which are greater (the cost for the employee's replacement and for the training programs are reduced). Thus both sides, which take decisions, consider that by offering a *decent* support, with some facilitating conditions, to keep a balance between the professional and household activities, they create a win-win situation for all the actors implied in the working activity.

The partly structure interviews had the purpose of identifying: the impact felt by employees, due to the changes produced by the birth of a child; their job responsibilities; as well as the modalities through which the employees think the state/company might help the parents. These issues were discussed with all 4 employees, who were about to start their child care leave. The employees were 2 women and 2 men, with ages between 30 and 40 and with different positions, in the production and in the administrative areas. To shortly describe their background, the 2 female employees are 31 and 35 years old. The first comes from the administrative area, having a managerial position, and the second is an engineer inside a department. They both graduated from university and they have been working for 6 and 11 years. They have been in the current position for 3 years.

The 2 male employees are 31 and 39 years old. They both come from the rural area and they occupy similar positions in the production department. As an educational background, they both graduated from high school.

The 4 employees' answers were similar, from several points of view. The differences consist in the perception of the state/company involvement, regarding the conciliation of the family life and o the working place.

The general aspects were the women's tendency of postponing the motherhood, due to the need of advancing into a position, which can assure them financial certainty. Both female employees considered themselves to be "career women", the professional fulfillment being rather a need. The moment of their children's birth was planned, discussed and agreed with their partners. Also, to find a balance, they both choose a period of absence, from the work field, of one year, because they consider it to be long enough to be able to come back and to cope with both their roles.

In the men's case, their choice was rather imposed by the situations they were in. One of them was forced to take the paternal leave, because his wife had to go back to work, after a year, not to lose her job. The commercial society where she worked, before taking the child care leave, declared bankruptcy, at the beginning of 2013, so she was at risk of losing her job at the end of her leave, in November 2014. Being a pharmaceutical assistant and finding a free position in her village, she applied for it and she was accepted. So, her partner was forced by the circumstances to take a year of child care leave.

The choice was very difficult for him, because together with his wife tried a lot of alternatives, before getting to this agreement. He reckons that the situation will get worse, as the child will grow, because they do not have a nursery or a kindergarten in their village, where they could take the child once he will be 2 years old and both partners will be working. Even if his wife has a sort of flexible schedule, working 6 hours a day, with a lunch break of one hour and despite her proximity to home, which is another advantage, these things do not comfort the parents, related to the way in which they will be able to manage taking care of their child.

In the case of the second male employee, he is a father for the second time, the first child having a severe handicap, is taken care of by his wife, so the responsibility of the two children, require the presence of both parents. Unfortunately, from the financial point of view, that is the cost-benefit calculation, the family will have a deficit and the household incomes will decrease, because the man is the one who has the biggest salary.

The oldest child is 15 years old and he was born with a locomotive severe handicap, which requires permanent surveillance and periodical medical interventions. Due to the fact that his mother is his permanent caretaker, she receives an allowance of 500 lei per month, which is sometimes delayed, so the only and the largest income of the household is the one of the husband.

The situation got worse when the oldest child wanted to continue his studies and, after the allocation, according to the grades, he was accepted at a high school from Satu Mare, which is 30 km away from their village. Because of the big distance, no teacher can come to their home, although the parents made a request and it was approved. A compromise solution was that every month or every two months, his class teacher will come to his place and that his parents will buy a computer, as soon as possible, for the child to be able to keep in touch with his class teacher, every week. But until these happen, his mother is the person in charge with his education.

That is the reason why, with the birth of his second child and in order to be able to cope with all the responsibilities, the father decided to ask for his individual working contract to be suspended, to take a child care taking leave. Even if this is a special situation, the partner declared that he has always offered his support and helped his wife with the household chores, such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of the new born child, in all aspects.

When asked about the period of minimum one year leave they would spend with their families, all interviewed people said that a part of the responsibilities of raising and educating the child will be taken by the father and that the household activities must be shared between family members. The male employees both agreed that if they had had the possibility of leaving their children in the care of grandparents or of close relatives, they wouldn't have chosen to take the parental leave.

Generally speaking, all respondents said that a major part of the child taking care is the mother's job, due to the *motherhood instinct*, and that this is absolutely normal, but that each partner has specific tasks, helping each other.

When asked if they knew the present legislation related to the reconciliation of the private and of the professional life, the answers were evasive. All the respondents mentioned the issues presented by the media and the fathers' leave, but they did not understand if the parental leave is compulsory or only recommended. But they all appreciated the internal policies of the company, the financial help, as well as the working schedule flexibility, which was the most mentioned, related to the emergency situations.

All in all, because of the organizational climate and of the internal policies, which take into considerations the legislative regulations of the UE, the employees of this company consider the aspects related to the (re)conciliation of the job, the family and of the private life, as being normal and they could not have it any other way.

But, without any doubt, the respondents' skepticism is related to the lack of kindergartens and nurseries. Thus, they consider that even if there would be certain subsidies, given by law, these services would be still difficult to reach. Due to the absence of certain solutions for the kindergartens and nurseries crisis, the present options rather try to reduce the informality point of the child care services. Therefore, this thing also reduces the chances of parents going back to work, before they children turn 2 or 3.

## **Discussions and conclusions**

At the end of the interviews, while trying to identify which could be the positive and negative effects of the reconciliation policies, some general ideas were defined. On one hand, people reckon that by the implication of the State into the settlement of the policies, which regulate a balance between the professional and private aspects, there will be an increase in the women's participation on the labour market, and therefore the number of women in leading positions, with right of decision, will increase. On the other hand, the employers think that these policies, external to companies, supported by the consistent internal policies, might make the employees to be faithful and motivated, might lead to a decrease in the number of no reason absences and of fictive medical leaves and that at the end of the day, these policies might lead to an increase of the productivity and to economical efficiency. Furthermore, these benefits will help the birth rate grow.

Looking at things from another point of view, one of the negative aspects of the reconciliation policies could be the high implication of the State in the private lives of individuals, as well as a flattening of the employees' income curve.

Still, when it comes to the reconciliation policies, we have to take into consideration the balance between what is desirable and what is feasible, because even if some of the discussed issues are desirable, they are not also feasible.

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