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An Experimental Approach on the Impact of the Gender Dimension in Local Elections

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Abstract:

Gender stereotypes, shaped by cultural values and personal beliefs, impact the way women are perceived in personal and professional settings. Nevertheless, the literature only recently started analyzing the impact of stereotypes on voting preferences for political seats, with a literature gap existing in the context of local rural elections. By providing two different groups of respondents with the same candidate CV, controlling only the name and picture of the person, this study analyzes the impact of gender on how candidates are perceived in terms of traits and competence. Results indicate that internal, unconscious biases lead to stereotypically feminine traits being attributed to female candidates while male candidates are viewed through more masculine stereotypes. These perceptions then influence the level of competence attributed to each candidate. In the long term it can impact the extent to which public policies take into account the gender dimension, leading to women issues in society not being addressed.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, local elections, equal representation, unconscious biases

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INTRODUCTION

Gender discrimination remains a persistent challenge in today's societies, shaping women's access to resources, professional advancement, and participation in decision-making processes. Despite legislative progress and global initiatives promoting equality, women continue to face structural and cultural barriers that restrict their representation in politics and public administration (Fellegi, et al., 2023; OECD, 2023). In Romania, for instance, women hold only 19% of parliamentary seats, well below the European Union average of 33.4%, and their presence in leadership positions in the public sector remains limited (Eurostat, 2025; Băluță & Tufiş, 2021). Such underrepresentation undermines democratic legitimacy, narrows the diversity of perspectives in policymaking, and perpetuates gender stereotypes that discourage women's civic engagement.

Equal representation in politics is not merely a question of fairness, but it is important in order to have an effective democracy. Ensuring that public institutions reflect the diversity of the populations they serve contributes to more balanced and inclusive decision-making. Studies have shown that when women participate in leadership and policy formulation, issues such as gender-based violence, education, healthcare, and social welfare receive greater attention (OECD, 2021, pp. 108-109; Dahlerup, 2018).

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In this context, analyzing how voters perceive female candidates and how gender influences electoral choices becomes relevant. Understanding these dynamics helps in understanding the structural and cultural barriers that continue to affect gender equality in public life. The field of public administration, which should ideally model equity and inclusiveness, often mirrors the broader inequalities found in society. Exploring the extent to which voters' attitudes and gender stereotypes affect women's chances of being elected can therefore contribute to the design of more equitable and inclusive policies, particularly in local governance.

The study's relevance is further underscored by the European Union Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, which calls for equal participation in political and decision-making processes and the elimination of gender-based stereotypes (EUR-lex, 2022). By situating the Romanian experience within a broader European and comparative framework, including references to Moldova and the Netherlands, this research contributes to understanding both national specificities and universal challenges regarding gender representation.

The present study investigates the impact of candidates' gender on electoral preferences during voting processes, focusing on local elections in rural areas from Romania. It employs a mixed-method approach combining quantitative analysis of electoral data from 2020 and 2024 with an experimental design. In this experiment, two groups of citizens were presented with identical résumés differing only in the candidate's gender. Their responses to a structured questionnaire provided insight into how voters evaluate the competence and suitability of male versus female candidates, enabling the testing of several hypotheses concerning gender stereotypes, perceived capability, and awareness of discrimination.

The article is structured as follows: the first section reviews theoretical perspectives on gender discrimination and stereotypes in electoral processes, the second outlines the methodology, the third outlines the main empirical findings derived from the experiment and statistical analysis of electoral data. The fourth section interprets these results in light of existing research and their implications for gender equality in local governance, and the final section presents the conclusions of the study along with policy and research recommendations.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Gender Equality in Politics and the Influence of Stereotypes on Voting

Gender stereotypes shape societal perceptions of women, raising the need to explore how these biases influence women's experiences in political life. Although democratic societies have made progress toward gender equality, leadership is still associated with traits considered "masculine," such as authority and assertiveness, while women are expected to display sensitivity and empathy (Todorov, et al., 2005; van Der Pas, et al., 2024). Several studies demonstrate that voters associate specific traits with gendered facial or behavioral cues, which subsequently affect electoral choices. Research from France by Eymeoud and Vertier (2023) shows that women candidates face discriminatory voting patterns, particularly in right-wing parties, and that discrimination decreases when voters receive more information about candidates' political experience. Their study also highlights misunderstandings of the electoral process and reveals that voters implicitly associate leadership power with male candidates. Similar dynamics were identified in the United States, where Saltzer and McGrath (2024) found that Democratic voters are generally more favorable toward female candidates, while Republican voters exhibit greater levels of sexism and penalize candidates (male or female) who display stereotypically feminine traits.

Other research confirms the influence of gender stereotypes on political careers and public perceptions. For example, Lawless (2009) shows that stereotypes shape media portrayals, recruitment processes, and electoral evaluations, leading to women's underrepresentation and

discouraging female political engagement. However, results from the United Kingdom suggest that stereotypes may not always determine voter preferences. Data suggests that voters' evaluations were influenced more by communication style than by the candidate's gender, indicating that non-aggressive and anecdotal communication increases likability, while emotionless, statistics-based speech increases perceived competence regardless of gender (Hargrave, 2023). Despite institutional rules aiming for parity, discriminatory voting patterns continue to limit women's electoral success, affecting both their willingness to enter politics and their performance once in office.

A deeper understanding of these dynamics is offered by Cella and Manzoni (2023), who indicate that gender biases influence both party recruitment strategies and election outcomes. Their model shows that parties nominate women only when they are exceptionally strong candidates, anticipating voter prejudice, a phenomenon that creates a double disadvantage: women are less likely to be nominated, and even when nominated, they face lower chances of being elected. Moreover, women who do win office tend to be more competent than their male counterparts, reflecting higher performance expectations. However, the researchers note that gender bias diminishes significantly when female politicians run for re-election, as their previous performance makes gender less relevant in voters' decisions (Cella & Manzoni, 2023).

Biases also affect policy outcomes, limiting the extent to which public policies reflect the needs of all citizens. This underrepresentation extends beyond the political sphere and affects multiple areas such as the media, the legal system, health care, and education (OECD, 2021, pp. 108-109). In politics, however, it has a particularly significant impact, as equal representation is essential for a democratic system to function effectively. Ensuring that leadership structures in public administration and elected bodies reflect the diversity of the populations they serve enhances both fairness and institutional performance.

As women constitute at least half of the population, fairness and equity require that they be equally present in decision-making processes across all sectors. Their involvement improves the quality of decisions and broadens political agendas; issues such as gender-based violence or women's health are more likely to be addressed when women participate in governance. Moreover, gender-balanced leadership provides role models for younger generations, encouraging girls to pursue careers even in male-dominated fields. Increased representation also enhances collaboration among political actors and contributes to reducing discriminatory norms and gender stereotypes within society, fostering long-term social change (Dahlerup, 2018). For these reasons, equal representation is important in order to have a fair democratic system, promote effective decision-making, reduce inequalities, and support broader social progress.

1.2 Comparative Analysis of Gender Equality in Romania, Moldova, and the Netherlands

A comparative analysis helped in better understanding the phenomenon, so we chose to analyze the literature in Romania, the Republic of Moldova, and the Netherlands to understand how gender inequality in politics manifests across different socio-political contexts. The Republic of Moldova, as a post-Soviet state, maintains a social and cultural legacy that reinforces traditional gender stereotypes and conservative views regarding women's roles in society and politics. Despite electing its first woman president, Maia Sandu, in 2020, gender equality remains limited. According to the Gender Equality Index presented by the Partnership for Development Center, equality across six domains scored only 61/100 in 2022, a decline from 2021, while women's parliamentary representation decreased to 38.2% in 2023 (Justiție Transparentă, 2023). Research shows that Moldovan women still face multiple barriers related to low self-confidence, a predominantly male political system, psychological constraints, heavy domestic responsibilities, and strong gender stereotypes that frame leadership as a male domain (Cheianu-Andrei, 2025). Although the country has an extensive legal framework focused on gender equality (Law 5/2006, Law 121/2012), limited implementation undermines its effectiveness, thereby allowing discriminatory practices to persist.

Romania, even though it is not a post-Soviet republic, shares historical, cultural, and linguistic similarities with Moldova. An analysis shows that between 1990 and 2016, women's representation in parliament increased from 4.9% to 11.5%, but remained low compared to other European states. It is considered that the post-communist rejection of the previous regime's formal egalitarianism contributed to a return to traditional values and a modern form of patriarchy (Oprica, 2008). More recent research by Băluță and Tufiş confirms that Romanian politics has been shaped predominantly by men, with women's representation improving after EU accession but stagnating or declining in recent years (Băluță & Tufiş, 2021).

A comparison between Romania and the Republic of Moldova indicates how former communist states continue to be shaped by cultural norms and gender stereotypes that restrict women's political participation. Although Moldova has made a symbolic breakthrough by electing a woman president, structural barriers remain strong, and enforcement of equality legislation is limited. Romania, despite European Union membership and a more stable institutional framework, still has a low number of women in political leadership roles compared to other European countries. Thus, both states illustrate the need for continued research into the social, institutional, and cultural factors that perpetuate gender inequality and limit women's access to political roles.

Comparing Romania with a more progressive Western European country, such as the Netherlands, offers a clearer understanding of gender discrimination, women's political representation, and the impact of gender stereotypes. The Netherlands is generally perceived as an egalitarian country, yet research by van der Pas, Aaldering and Steenvoorden shows that gender stereotypes still influence voters' evaluations of political candidates. Their study reveals that voters of radical right-wing populist parties prefer male candidates, while supporters of left-wing and especially green parties are slightly more inclined to prefer women. Moreover, voters attribute greater competence to women on issues related to empathy, such as health, social welfare and the environment, while men are viewed as more competent on topics like security, immigration or taxation. Because these issue areas align differently with left and right-wing agendas, right-wing voters tend to choose men, whereas left-wing voters more often support women (van der Pas, et al., 2022). Stereotypes regarding emotionality, sensitivity or assertiveness also contribute to the perception that men are better suited for leadership roles.

Underrepresentation remains a challenge in the Netherlands as well. Studies argue that women's participation has stagnated, despite the country's egalitarian reputation. Only around 38% of members of the House of Representatives were women in 2023, and the political environment continues to be marked by sexism, a lack of female role models, and structural discouragement that pushes many women to leave politics (Mügge, et al., 2024). Still, as currently Romania is far from the 38% and at the bottom of the European Ranking for women representation, Netherlands still represents a role model.

Data from the European Institute for Gender Equality confirm that the Netherlands performs well overall. In 2023 it achieved a Gender Equality Index score of 77.9, ranking second in the EU, while in the "Power" domain it reached 72.7 points. Women hold 48% of ministerial positions, 36% of parliamentary seats, and about 40% of local or regional positions (EIGE, 2022; EIGE, 2023 a). The country also has a strong legislative framework, including constitutional guarantees against discrimination (Art. 1, 1986, amendments 2026), the Equal Pay Act (Law 129/1975), the Equal Treatment of Men and Women Act (Law 86/1980), and the General Equal Treatment Act (Law 230/1994).

In contrast, Romania's 2023 Gender Equality Index score is only 56.1, the lowest in the European Union, despite a slight improvement from the previous year. The disparities are even greater in the "Power" domain: only 9% of ministers, 20% of members of parliament, and 21% of local or regional leaders are women (EIGE, 2023 b). Studies note that gender stereotypes strongly influence political

attitudes and voter preferences. According to the 2018 Gender Barometer, 43% of Romanians believe that family life suffers when women work, while 44% think women primarily desire a family and children, even though 96% agree that both partners should contribute financially (Centrul Filia, 2018). These contradictory beliefs reflect the coexistence of traditional and modern norms. Politically, these stereotypes translate into limited opportunities for women, as parties often include female candidates merely to meet formal requirements, placing them in ineligible positions and restricting their chances of electoral success (Băluță & Tufiş, 2021).

Therefore, despite major differences in historical and cultural contexts, both Romania and the Netherlands confront with gender stereotypes and patterns of underrepresentation in politics, although at different levels. While the Netherlands scores significantly higher on the Gender Equality Index and maintains stronger legal protections, structural barriers and voter biases still limit women's political opportunities. Romania, by comparison, struggles with deeper societal stereotypes and more pronounced disparities in political power. The comparison of Romania, Moldova, and the Netherlands shows that gender inequality and stereotypes persist across different societies, affecting women's political representation.

2. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this research is to examine gender discrimination in voters' behavior and how the gender of the candidates influences local electoral choices. This topic is important because understanding these dynamics can help in identifying structural and social barriers that perpetuate inequality in political representation. The study aims to identify the extent to which gender biases impact voting, focusing on three specific objectives: the influence of gender on the choice of an ideal candidate, the perception of candidates' competence and voters' awareness of gender discrimination. By achieving these objectives, the research can provide insights into how gender stereotypes affect electoral outcomes and help in developing strategies to promote fairer and more inclusive political participation. For this purpose, the study tests six hypotheses:

- Female candidates are less likely to be voted for than male candidates;
- Citizens are more likely to vote for candidates of the same gender as themselves rather than for candidates of the opposite gender;
- Stereotypical female traits are more strongly associated with women than with men;
- Stereotypical male traits are more strongly associated with men than with women;
- Citizens perceive female candidates as less capable than male candidates;
- Women are more aware than men of the existence of gender discrimination in society and public administration.

To complement the experimental data, quantitative document analysis was conducted on local elections from 2020 and 2024, in Neamț County. This involved examining voter turnout, candidate demographics, and election outcomes using official sources, including the Permanent Electoral Authority and the Central Electoral Bureau databases. This method enabled a rigorous comparison between years and across rural and urban areas, providing an objective assessment of gender representation, voting behavior, and the persistence of gender-related disparities in local politics. The quantitative analysis also helps in having a better understanding of the areas where women are less often selected in leadership roles, helping us identify the area where the experiment will be later employed.

The second part of the study was based on a questionnaire applied to two groups in a rural commune, where one group received a CV of a male candidate and the other of a female candidate for the mayor's position. We chose a rural area because voter turnout is generally higher than in urban areas, making the results more relevant for analyzing electoral behavior. Additionally, rural populations tend

to be older and more likely to hold conservative values, including traditional gender role beliefs, making this context significant for studying perceptions of gender discrimination.

The CVs provided to the respondents were designed on the profiles of real Romanian mayors, and included detailed academic and professional achievements to assess voters' perceptions of competence and leadership, while controlling for gender as the only different variable. The questionnaire included demographic questions, Likert-scale assessments of traits and mayoral responsibilities developed based on the job descriptions of mayors in rural communes in Romania, and items adapted from the Modern Sexism Scale (Swim, et al., 1995) to measure awareness of gender discrimination. The questionnaire was distributed to two randomly assigned groups, ensuring that each participant viewed only one version of the candidate's CV. All 131 respondents were eligible voters (18+ years old) and were distributed almost equally by gender (70 women, 61 men), covering a wide range of ages to best reflect the commune's population. Group A, which evaluated the female candidate, included 66 participants (35 women and 31 men), while Group B, which evaluated the male candidate, included 65 participants (35 women and 30 men). The largest age category among respondents was the 41–60 group, with 47 individuals, followed by the 61–80 group with 38 participants, whereas the smallest group consisted of respondents aged 18–25, totaling only nine individuals. The questionnaires and CVs were distributed online, with the help of a Bălătești City Hall employee, who shared them via WhatsApp to acquaintances, and other staff members who further circulated them within the community, and data was collected over a period of three months and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

3. RESULTS

The quantitative analysis of local elections in Neamț County, focusing on the communes of Bălătești and Negrești, as well as the cities of Piatra Neamț and Târgu-Neamț, reveals persistent gender disparities. Across the 2020 and 2024 elections, male candidates dominated mayoral positions, with only one exception where women were elected (Negrești in 2024). For local councils, although the percentage of female candidates sometimes exceeded 40%, women remained underrepresented in elected positions, especially in rural areas. Voter turnout shows that women consistently participated in higher numbers than men, particularly in older age groups, while younger voters, especially men, were less active.

Table 1. Candidates for the mayor function

	Female candidates for mayor		Male candidates for mayor	
	2020	2024	2020	2024
Bălătești	20%	0	80%	100%
Negrești	16,67%	33,33%	83,33%	66,67%
Piatra Neamț	11,11%	27,27%	88,89%	72,73%
Târgu Neamț	0	28,57%	100%	71,43%

Source: Authors, based on (BEC, 2020) and (BEC, 2024)

Table 2. Candidates for local council

	Female candidates for local council		Male candidates for local council	
	2020	2024	2020	2024
Bălătești	25,31%	22,35%	74,69%	77,65%
Negrești	39%	45,71%	61%	54,29%
Piatra Neamț	26,63%	40%	73,37%	60%
Târgu Neamț	32,11%	37,73%	67,89%	62,27%

Source: Authors, based on (BEC, 2020) and (BEC, 2024)

Table 3. Gender distribution on voter turnout

	Female voters		Male voters		Voter turnout	
	2020	2024	2020	2024	2020	2024
Băltătești	51,61%	51,68%	48,39%	48,32%	46,83%	57,06%
Negrești	50,51%	50,72%	49,49%	49,28%	58,87%	57,74%
Piatra Neamț	53,07%	54,90%	46,93%	45,1%	32,51%	40,44%
Târgu Neamț	52,27%	54,02%	47,73%	45,98%	41,69%	43,48%

Source: Authors, based on (BEC, 2020) and (BEC, 2024)

These patterns suggest that cultural and social barriers, including gender stereotypes, continue to influence both the willingness of women to run for office and citizens' trust in female candidates. Despite higher female voter turnout, women are significantly underrepresented in leadership and decision-making roles in local administration. The trends are similar in urban and rural areas and align with national patterns, highlighting ongoing challenges for gender equality in local political participation and the potential impact of age and conservative attitudes on electoral outcomes.

As shown in table 1 and 2, regarding the number of mayoral candidates, rural and urban areas exhibit a similar pattern, with a significantly higher proportion of male candidates. For instance, in 2020, Băltătești had four male and one female candidate, and Negrești had five male and one female candidate, while in urban areas, Piatra Neamț in 2024 had five male and two female candidates, and Târgu-Neamț had four male and two female candidates. This indicates that gender disparities at the mayoral level are consistent across rural and urban contexts. Differences between rural and urban areas are more noticeable in the proportion of female local councilors. In urban councils, the proportion of female councilors is higher, reflecting the larger number of seats available. For example, Piatra Neamț in 2024 had 40% female councilors compared to 22.35% in Băltătești. Regarding voter turnout, gender distribution is relatively balanced across rural and urban areas, with women slightly outnumbering men in most cases. For example, in Băltătești in 2024, female turnout was 51.68%, while male turnout was 48.32%, and in Piatra Neamț, female turnout reached 54.90% compared to 45.10% for men. These data suggest that while women are well represented among voters, this does not directly translate into proportionate representation among elected officials, highlighting structural and cultural barriers.

3.1 Gender stereotypes during voting

To test the first hypothesis, "Female candidates are less likely to be voted in than male candidates", we used an Independent Samples t-Test, comparing voting intention with the gender of the candidate, represented by the group each respondent belonged to (those who received the male CV vs. the female CV). The results based on the 131 participants indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($t = -8.333$, $p < 0.001$), meaning that respondents were substantially more inclined to vote for the male candidate. This is further confirmed by the average voting intention score, which is higher for the male candidate ($M = 8.43$, $SD = 0.98$) than for the female candidate ($M = 6.97$, $SD = 1.02$). Therefore, within the context of the experiment, female candidates are having significantly lower chances of being voted in than male candidates.

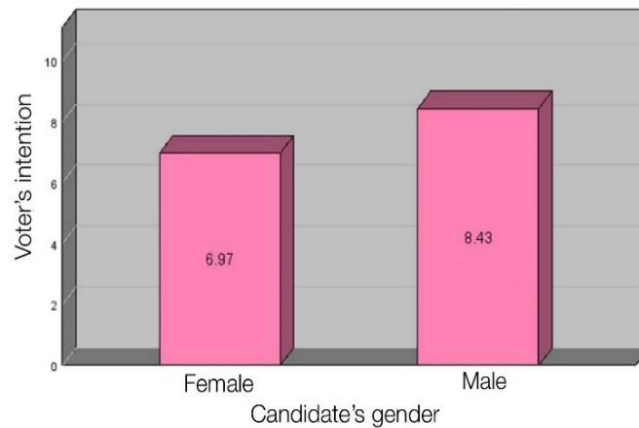


Figure 1. Voters' intention based on candidate's gender

The second hypothesis, "Citizens are more likely to vote for candidates of the same gender as them than of the opposite gender" was tested using a Two-Way ANOVA, as the analysis involved four groups formed by two variables (Respondent Group and Respondent Gender): women who evaluated the female CV, women who evaluated the male CV, men who evaluated the female CV, and men who evaluated the male CV. The ANOVA indicated a significant main effect of the candidate's gender on voting intention ($F = 67.59$, $p < 0.001$), confirming once again that the female candidate received significantly lower scores than the male candidate. However, the respondent's gender had no significant effect ($F = 0.31$, $p = 0.861$), and no significant interaction was found between the candidate's gender and the respondent's gender ($F = 0.248$, $p = 0.619$), meaning that the patterns of evaluation did not differ between men and women. The mean scores for all four groups were also very similar, reinforcing this conclusion.

Thus, although social identity theory suggests that individuals tend to favor members of their own group (Tajfel & Turner, 2001; Spears, 2021), the hypothesis was not statistically confirmed. According to the respondents' answers, neither women showed a higher preference for female candidates nor men for male candidates. The interaction plot further illustrates this lack of effect, as both male and female respondents expressed greater support for the male candidate, without any significant influence of respondent gender on same-gender candidate preference.

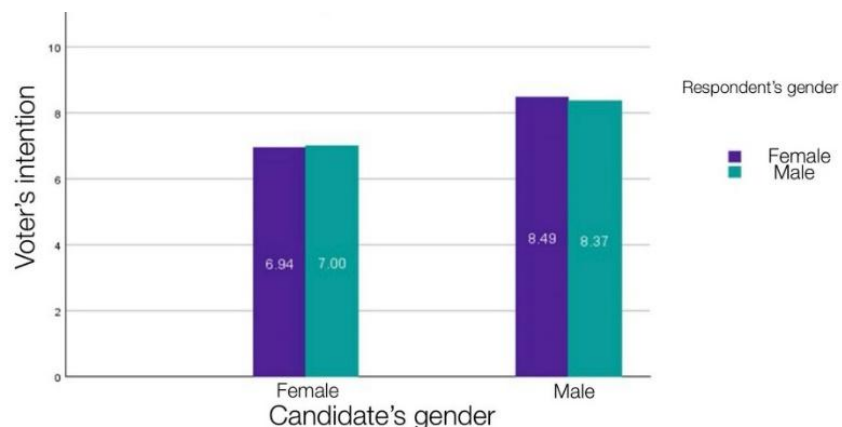


Figure 2. Voters' intention based on their gender and candidate's gender

The third and fourth hypotheses, "Female stereotypical traits are more associated with women than men" and "Male stereotypical traits are more associated with men than women" were tested using two independent-samples t-Tests. To measure the attribution of stereotypical traits, two composite variables were created: Stereotypical Masculine Traits (based on assertiveness, decision-making,

charisma) and Stereotypical Feminine Traits (based on generosity, empathy, receptivity), each calculated as the mean of the respective item scores. The internal consistency of both scales was high (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.950 for masculine traits; 0.883 for feminine traits), indicating that the items reliably measured the intended constructs. The results show that participants who evaluated the male candidate attributed significantly more masculine traits than those who evaluated the female candidate, a finding reflected both statistically and in the difference between group means ($M = 9.13$, $SD = 0.72$ for the male candidate; $M = 7.03$, $SD = 0.79$ for the female candidate).

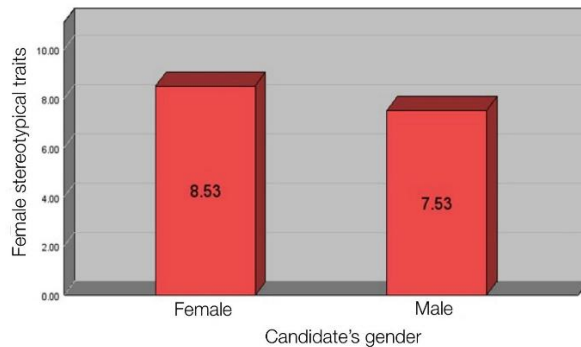


Figure 3. Female stereotypical traits association (left)

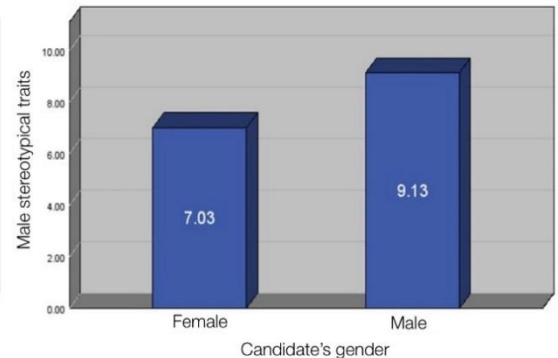


Figure 4. Male stereotypical traits association (right)

Similarly, the second t-Test confirmed that respondents who received the female CV attributed significantly more feminine traits to the female candidate ($t = 6.85$, $p < 0.001$), with a strong effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.19$). Overall, the findings confirm both hypotheses: participants associate stereotypically masculine traits with male candidates and stereotypically feminine traits with female candidates. These results align with the literature showing that even when voters are given objective and equal information about candidates' qualifications, gender stereotypes continue to impact perceptions (Lawless, 2009).

3.2 Perception versus awareness

For the fifth hypothesis, "Citizens perceive female candidates as less capable than male candidates", we created a composite variable based on 13 items measuring mayoral responsibilities and one global item assessing how capable the candidate would be as a mayor. The internal consistency of these items was extremely high (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.966). Using this composite variable, we conducted an independent samples t-test, which showed a statistically significant difference in capability perception depending on the candidate's gender ($t = -8.604$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents who evaluated the male candidate reported a considerably higher mean capability score ($M = 8.42$, $SD = 0.73$) compared to those who evaluated the female candidate ($M = 7.29$, $SD = 0.77$), and the effect size was very large (Cohen's $d = -1.50$).

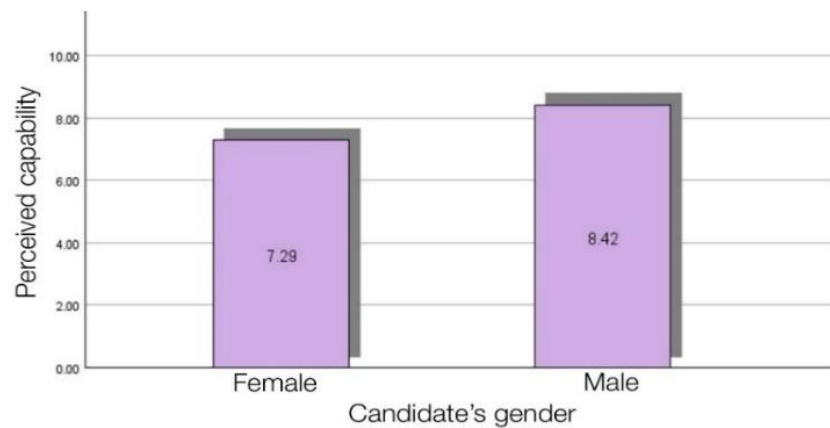


Figure 5. Perceived capability based on gender

These findings confirm the hypothesis and align with existing research indicating that voters associate stereotypical traits with candidates even when they receive identical information about qualifications and experience. Because feminine stereotypes are perceived as more passive while masculine stereotypes align with traditional leadership traits, male candidates tend to be judged as more suitable and capable (Saltzer & McGrath, 2024). The results of our experiment demonstrate that this bias is also present among voters in Neamț County, where stereotypical associations lead to a distorted perception of competence that disadvantages female candidates.

For testing the final hypothesis, “Women are more aware than men of gender discrimination in society and public administration” the questionnaire included items adapted from the Modern Sexism Scale (Hunter, et al., 1995). A composite variable was created using the average score of all items in this section, after recoding reversed-scored keyed items. The internal reliability of the scale was very high (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.915). An independent samples t-test comparing the total discrimination awareness score by respondent gender showed no statistically significant difference between groups ($t = -1.58$, $p = 0.115$). Female participants reported a slightly lower awareness score ($M = 6.97$, $SD = 1.10$) than male participants ($M = 7.22$, $SD = 0.63$), but this difference was not significant.

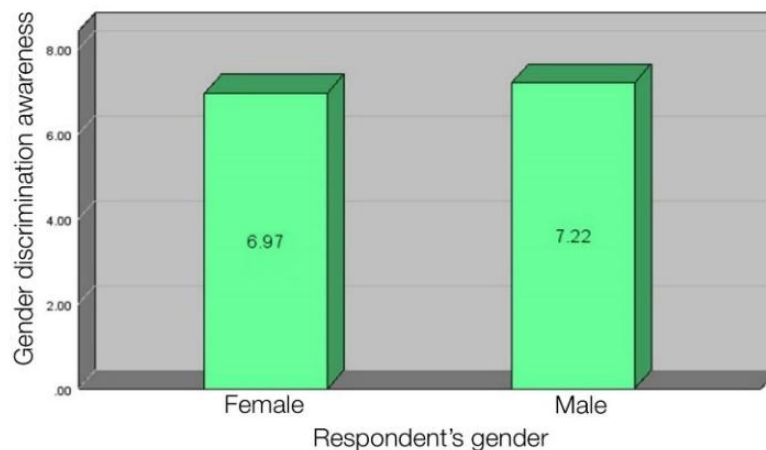


Figure 6. Gender discrimination awareness based on voter's gender

Thus, the results do not confirm the hypothesis or the expectations drawn from the literature, which suggests that direct exposure to discrimination typically increases awareness (Swim, et al., 2001). In this sample, women did not demonstrate a higher awareness of gender discrimination than men; on the contrary, men scored marginally higher. However, since both groups reported average scores above five, the findings indicate that both men and women acknowledge the existence of gender discrimination.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The results of the experiment confirm some of the initial hypotheses, indicating that female candidates are significantly less likely to be voted for than male candidates, even when both have identical qualifications and professional experience. This finding highlights the influence of gender on voting behavior and shows that women face disadvantages from the earliest stages of electoral evaluation. Therefore, women's political participation continues to be limited not only by structural barriers, such as reduced party support, but also by voters' implicit biases rooted in gender stereotypes.

These results are consistent with previous research showing that women tend to be evaluated more critically than men in both social and professional contexts. For instance, Iordache and Ionescu (2019) found that, although women judges are perceived as responsible and competent, they are less often preferred for leadership positions. Such perceptions reveal double standards that make women work harder to gain the same recognition as their male counterparts. In politics, these attitudes reinforce a gendered hierarchy that restricts fair representation and keeps public decision-making oriented toward male perspectives. The results align with gender theories like the glass cliff, which states that women are promoted in struggling organizations or when a position is less prestigious (Morgenroth, et al., 2020).

Contrary to the theory of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2001), the experiment found no evidence that voters preferred candidates of their own gender. Both male and female respondents favored the male candidate, which suggests that gender stereotypes override potential in-group identification. Although this might superficially suggest objectivity, the data instead reveal a shared cultural bias, where both women and men internalize and reproduce gendered perceptions of leadership. The absence of female solidarity in voting further decreases women's chances of electoral success and increases the pressure on them to prove their competence beyond what is expected of men (Sokani, 2025). This dynamic can contribute to professional exhaustion and discourage women from seeking leadership roles.

The results also indicate that stereotypical traits continue to shape perceptions of political candidates. Female candidates were attributed qualities such as empathy and receptivity, while male candidates were associated with firmness, charisma, and decision-making power. These stereotypes reinforce the idea that "feminine" traits are less compatible with leadership, positioning women at an initial disadvantage in elections. Moreover, when women adopt behaviors culturally labeled as "masculine," such as assertiveness or decisiveness, they risk being judged negatively, as shown by Rudman and Glick (1999). This double bind constrains women's ability to express authentic leadership styles and contributes to the persistence of gender inequality in politics.

The results indicate that voters' perceptions are shaped by gender stereotypes, as the female candidate was evaluated as less capable than the male candidate despite having identical qualifications, experience and skills. This reflects a form of indirect discrimination that disadvantages women seeking public or leadership roles, reducing their electoral support and undermining the principle of meritocracy. Consequently, women often must demonstrate superior performance to be considered equally competent, while men benefit from an initial advantage of credibility and authority (Lattore, et al., 2025). Such biases can discourage women from entering politics, reinforce their underrepresentation, and distort electoral behavior, potentially leading voters to prefer less qualified men over equally or more qualified women. Moreover, even when women do attain public positions, these prejudices may continue to affect how they are perceived and treated, exposing them to ongoing doubt and undervaluation (Rohrbach, 2024).

Finally, regarding awareness of gender discrimination, results showed no significant difference between male and female respondents. So, even though women did not score significantly higher than men, as the hypothesis and international results predicted, both genders reported high levels of

awareness regarding the existence of gender discrimination in society and public administration. Interestingly, men even scored slightly higher, contradicting established findings in the literature. When these results are compared with the previous statistical tests, a clear contrast emerges: although respondents, both male and female, displayed discriminatory behaviors toward the female candidate, rating her as less capable despite identical qualifications, expressing lower voting intention, and associating traits based on stereotypes, they simultaneously acknowledged that gender discrimination is a real and persistent problem. This contrast between explicit awareness and implicit discriminatory behavior reflects what the literature defines as attitudinal-behavioral dissonance: individuals recognize discrimination in theory, but continue to reproduce it in practice, often unconsciously (Kawakami, et al., 2000; Tao, 2024).

5. CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing both the theoretical framework and the empirical data, the study confirms that gender discrimination continues to influence electoral behavior and political representation at the local level. Although women vote in elections in higher proportions than men, especially in rural areas, they remain underrepresented as candidates and officeholders, mainly due to persistent stereotypes and voters' biased perceptions. The comparative analysis of the 2020 and 2024 local elections in Neamț County showed that male candidates overwhelmingly dominate electoral lists and leadership positions, while women's presence, though increasing slightly, rarely translates into actual representation. The experimental research conducted in Bălățești further demonstrated that female candidates are significantly less likely to be voted for than equally qualified male candidates, that voters associate stereotypically feminine traits (empathy, receptivity) with women and masculine traits (firmness, charisma) with men, and that both genders perceive female candidates as less capable of holding leadership positions.

To deepen the understanding of this phenomenon, future studies should replicate the experiment in more diverse contexts, using larger and more heterogeneous samples to test the consistency of results across regions and social groups. Extending the research to different electoral contexts (presidential, parliamentary, or European elections) could help identify whether the same patterns of gender bias persist at various political levels. Furthermore, a mixed methodological approach, combining quantitative surveys with interviews or focus groups, could provide richer insights into the motivations and emotions that underpin voters' perceptions. Investigating the intersection between gender and other variables such as ethnicity, age, or education would also allow a more nuanced understanding of discrimination dynamics in politics.

At the same time, the study highlights the need for concrete interventions to reduce gender inequalities in both the electoral arena and public administration. Female candidates can counteract stereotypes by combining traits perceived as empathetic and cooperative with those associated with competence and leadership, while campaigns should clearly communicate professional achievements to overcome gender-based assumptions. Institutional actions are equally necessary. Public information programs on gender equality, mandatory anti-discrimination training for public officials, and the adoption of gender parity policies within political parties could substantially improve representation. In addition, educational reforms and exposure to female role models from an early age can prevent the transmission of stereotypes to future generations. Finally, revising the legislative framework to ensure real sanctions and incentives to promote gender-balanced participation, along with mentorship programs for women, especially in rural areas, can strengthen confidence and participation in politics. In essence, the research demonstrates that despite a widespread awareness of gender discrimination, stereotypes continue to influence voters' attitudes and decisions, calling for sustained, multi-level efforts from institutions, political actors, and society to promote genuine equality and fair representation in public life.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

AM documented and identified the bibliography, with contributions from GFG; AM & GFG designed the instrument, AM collected and interpreted the data, and wrote the manuscript, with the supervision of GFG. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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