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BURNOUT: A BRIEF THEORETICAL APPROACH IN THE CURRENT GLOBAL CONTEXT

Georgiana-Virginia BONEA[1]

Abstract*: The study of the burnout syndrome is important in order to explain and identify its main defining coordinates, causes and trends, being seen as a disease of the modern world. Overall, the present study provides a theoretical analysis of the burnout syndrome, through the investigation of the specialized scientific literature. After a brief (1) introduction to the context, the study provides a series of answers to several questions such as: (2) Short theoretical discussion: What is burnout?; (3) How does it manifest?; (4) What are the main risk factors favouring the appearance and maintenance of burnout?; (5) What are the consequences of burnout? (6) Burnout: What are the main methods and techniques of prevention and treatment?. The study concludes with a series of relevant discussions and (7) conclusions. The main purpose of the study is to outline a clear picture of the burnout syndrome, which can later contribute to future empirical studies. The principal limitation was the impossibility of anticipating future trends in the evolution of the burnout syndrome, given the current period characterized by uncertainties and unprecedented changes, which inevitably have a direct or indirect impact with its occurrence and manifestation.*
Keywords: *burnout, exhaustion, stress, work, crisis.*

Introduction to the context

The rapid, large-scale spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a global pandemic of COVID-19 in March 2020. According to WHO, until August 1st, 2023, a number of 768,560,727 confirmed cases of infection with COVID-19 were reported globally, of which 6,952,522 deaths. By 17th May, the number of confirmed cases arrived at over 775 million confirmed cases world wide, with more than seven million deaths. Thus, it was necessary to impose quarantine and social isolation, as the main measure to protect the population against

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the spread of the virus at the community level. In such circumstances, there have been many changes in work, society and disruptions to the individual's life. The new challenges that came in the avalanche forced the ability of states, organizations and individuals to face and adapt. In other words, in the current global context, in which fast changes are occurring, as a result of the globalization of crises on several levels, the burnout syndrome has known an ascending evolution as it has become more and more analysed, mainly in the context of the work environment (Sann, 2003; Chirico, 2016). In conclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about a multitude of changes whose effects are difficult to analyse in the long run, highlighting the need to adapt to new challenges at work especially (Arpinte, et al., 2020; Roşca, 2021; Bonea, 2022a, 2022b). In this context, work exclusively at home or hybrid work involved unprecedented changes, which outlined new problems and vulnerabilities on all levels of life (Meynaar et al., 2021; Barriga Medina et al., 2021; Sklar et al., 2021).

Also, the development of artificial intelligence (AI) follows a fast upward course with numerous changes both in people's daily life and especially in the labor market. We are talking about an unprecedented technological revolution in which AI meets human intelligence and ingenuity to respond to the new challenges of the future labor market (Joamets and Chochia, 2020, 255). AI has a major and important impact in the development of the work of the future, as well as global economic growth. In its infancy, AI is rapidly taking shape, encompassing more and more segments of the labor market (Zhou, et.al. 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic only accelerated the development of new technologies, showing new directions for the development of the workforce (Kutnjak, 2021).

With these coordinates, the study of burnout syndrome began to acquire new valences, as the pandemic context imposed certain unpredictable changes, but also restrictions, especially regarding professional and social life. Mainly, the burnout syndrome is discussed in the context of career, work and professional life, regardless of the field of activity, but it can also be analysed in the individual, family, social, educational or organizational context (Chirico, 2016; Pedrabissi, et al., 1993; Freudenberger and Richelson, 1980; Bridgeman, et al., 2018). Burnout syndrome differs from one individual to another, because it must consider a number of characteristics such as: age, gender, physical and mental resources, degree of resistance to stressors, relationships with others, attitude towards work,

the ability to adapt to the new (Manzano-García and Ayala-Calvo, 2013, 800).

The mission of the current study is to reveal certain characteristics on the subject of burnout syndrome. The definition, diagnosis and especially the treatment of the burnout syndrome is an extremely interesting and debatable topic, with many unknowns to be discovered and analysed as specific empirical studies progress (Korczak et al., 2012).

Through the theoretical analysis of specialized scientific literature, the objective of the present study is to build an overview of the coordinates of burnout syndrome, answering several questions aimed at defining, forms of manifestation, favourable factors, consequences, prevention and treatment. The paper can be a good basis for qualitative and/or quantitative research, providing the necessary theoretical clarifications. The findings will complete the analysis, offering a number of clarifications on burnout syndrome.

Considering the current global context, characterized by rapid and unforeseen changes at all levels, one of the main limitations of the study was the difficulty of outlining the whole picture of future developments and new challenges of the burnout syndrome in the scientific world. Another major limitation was the unpredictability of imposing new rules of interaction, work and relationships, given the pandemic context and, at the same time, the globalization of various crisis situations, with an impact on burnout. The importance of existing specific studies regarding burnout syndrome research is obvious, but another major limitation was due to the fact that it is a condition of the modern society, which was relatively recently introduced in the research area (in 1974 by Freudenberger). In other words, on the one hand, it is a relatively new research topic and a very important aspect for the health of the contemporary individual, especially in the occupational context, but on the other hand, a series of specific limitations appeared precisely for this reason.

Through the theoretical analysis of the burnout syndrome, the current study seeks to answer a series of questions aimed at defining the phenomenon; its forms of manifestation; the main supporting factors; the consequences from an individual, organizational and relational level; as well as prevention and treatment methods. In conclusion, the study offers a series of relevant conclusions and solutions resulting from the analysis.

Short theoretical discussion: What is burnout?

Burnout is one of the most harmful negative effects of a socio-psychological nature in the working environment of today's society (Salanova and Llorens, 2008, 59). The psychologist Herbert Freudenberger used the term *burnout* in 1974, for the first time, to describe the state of physical and mental exhaustion of the workers in the public domain. There is no generally valid and globally accepted definition, but there are certain symptoms, common signs and causal factors that are generally valid (Kaschka, et al., 2011, 782). In short, burnout syndrome translates into increased fatigue, low energy, depersonalization and reduced professional accomplishment which are the main signs of prolonged exposure to certain stressors (Freudenberger and Richelson, 1980). On the other hand, stress is directly related to burnout syndrome and the term *stress* was first used in 1950 by Hans Selye. Stress usually occurs when an individual's requirements far exceed the resources available to him in terms of adaptation. The burnout syndrome is often translated as *exhaustion*, either mental and/or physical, which usually occurs as a result of prolonged exposure to various stressors and constant tension (Freudenberger and Richelson, 1980; Sann, 2003).

The burnt-out expression means that the individual no longer has energy, can no longer be productive and is exhausted (Ochentel et al., 2018, 475). Most often, burnout syndrome is generally characterized as a condition of overwork until exhaustion, as well as continuous and prolonged exposure to stressors (Ndetei et al., 2008; Carod-Artal and Vázquez-Cabrera, 2013). In conclusion, burnout is the consequence of a difficult, tense, stressful work environment (Schonfeld et al., 2018, 218). Therefore, burnout is an emotional response to chronic stress, which is defined by physical and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and decreased productivity at work (Perlman and Hartman, 1982).

WHO (28 May 2019) links the burnout syndrome to occupational mental health and defines it by the following elements: a feeling of loss of energy, exhaustion, significant mental distance from the job, negativism about the job and poor efficiency in achieving goals, low productivity. Consequently, burnout is often analysed as a work-related phenomenon (West et al., 2018, 516).

In other words, the stress and exhaustion accumulated over a long period

of time becomes chronic and leads to the appearance of burnout syndrome. More precisely, emotional exhaustion and later physical exhaustion, depersonalization and ignoring personal life, are the essence of burnout (Schonfeld et al., 2018, 218). Exhaustion occurs when working hours are a lot, while time spent relaxing and resting is very short or non-existent. It must be emphasized that defining the burnout syndrome is a very complex process in itself, because it includes aspects that are constantly changing, such as social dynamics and society itself, the labour market and the work environment, the individual and interrelationships etc. (see Box 1).

Box 1. The main explanatory theoretical models of burnout syndrome: short exposure

The cognitive-social theory of the self explains burnout through the factors related to the competition between individuals and their efficiency, and the motivation determines the effectiveness in order to achieve the objectives set in the work (Harrison, 1983).

The appearance and manifestation of the burnout syndrome is explained, mainly, in *the work environment*, being characterized by exhaustion, dissatisfaction with the work done, negative attitude and insensitivity towards those around, depersonalization. This is one of the main explanatory theoretical models of burnout, proposed by Maslach, Jakson, and Leiter (1986), who suggested the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI).

Furthermore, the *explanatory theoretical model proposed* by Golembiewski, Munzenrider and Stevenson (1986) shows that burnout can range from depersonalization of the employee to lack of personal and professional achievement, which leads to emotional exhaustion.

Another theoretical model, developed by Lee and Ashforth (1993), drew attention to the fact that burnout can range from emotional exhaustion of the individual to depersonalization and, at the same time, from emotional exhaustion to lack of personal fulfilment.

The social exchange theoretical model analyses burnout syndrome in nurses through emotional and aptitude. Also, in the social exchange with patients, there are three major stressors such as: uncertainty, perception of fairness and lack of control (Buunk and Schaufeli, 1993).

Furthermore, according to *the conservation of resources theory*, stress occurs when there are certain frustrations related to the work environment or when the job is threatened, leading to undermining confidence in their own skills (Hobfoll and Freedy (1993).

Also, *the organizational theory* shows that burnout is the physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by work, being identified a close relationship between culture, social support, organizational climate and structure within the organization (Winnubst, 1993).

Furthermore, *the structural model* analysed three major areas of research, as follows: 1) the emphasis is on personal variables, highlighting competence, meaning of work, level of awareness; 2) the focus is on social exchange processes and the consequences that professionals may face, emphasizing the perception of equal, equitable

relationships, without incurring losses or threats; 3) The emphasis is on variables related to the work environment, which can cause various problems from organization to work climate (Gil-Monte, et al., 1995).

The model of guilt highlights and analyses the feeling of guilt in the individual, in which exhaustion plays an important role in the onset of burnout syndrome through two profiles: 1) a situation in which workers, although they have developed burnout syndrome, do not suffer from guilt and can perform their tasks, even at a lower efficiency; 2) the situation in which the feeling of guilt is strong and the worker will make a greater effort at work in order to compensate for remorse. Thus, there is exhaustion and the feeling of unrealization, non-fulfilment on a professional level, depersonalization appearing (Gil-Monte et al., 1995; Gil-Monte and Moreno-Jiménez, 2005).

Self-determination theory it is useful in explaining the occurrence of exhaustion on the background of considerable long-term efforts in any field of activity in order to achieve predetermined objectives. However, the links between a strong motivation and the occurrence of burnout are not demonstrated.

Source: Carod-Artal and Vázquez-Cabrera, 2013; Leiter, 2018; Manzano-García and Ayala-Calvo, 2013; Chirico, 2016; Maslach et al., 1986; Cresswell and Eklund, 2005.

Depending on the individual's level of dedication to his work, which is one of the classification criteria of burnout, several types of burnouts can be identified, as there is a real imbalance between work and remuneration. Therefore, the *frenetic* is the profile that characterizes an individual totally dedicated to his work; followed by *the unchallenged profile*, characterized by his evasive coping style; then *the used profile*, which is one of the least dedicated individuals, with a passive coping style (Montero-Marín et al., 2014, 2016).

There are, however, notable differences between burnout and stress, for example, stress is caused by a certain passing tension, while burnout is caused by continuous tensions, with very high demands and a maximum exploitation of one's own physical, mental and cognitive resources (Pines and Keinan, 2005; Pedrabissi et al., 1993). Stress that cannot be managed and overcome will later turn into burnout, when the individual can no longer keep up with high blood pressure and chronic exhaustion (Silbiger and Pines, 2014; Moate et al., 2016).

Burnout syndrome is one of the biggest challenges in the contemporary world when it comes to the work environment and stressors that can cause various health problems both physically, acting and mentally for the individual. In other words, the continuous stress caused by exhaustion, difficult conditions at work, and various individual features of vulnerability

can define burnout syndrome (Carod-Artal and Vázquez-Cabrera, 2013, 15).

To conclude, burnout is, in general terms, an incorporation of the following symptoms: physical and mental exhaustion, personal failure, chronic fatigue, cynicism, depersonalization, distancing from everyone around and low performance in reaching predetermined objectives. The causes of burnout are among the most varied, from overwork at work, lack of free time, ignoring one's own needs, insufficient salary, very high demand and high responsibility at work (Hillert and Marwitz, 2006).

How does burnout manifest itself?

Chronic stress that extends over a long period of time leads to exhaustion, whether we are talking about professional, social or family exhaustion. Thus, the inability to complete the tasks intervenes, during which the individual feels helplessness and despair. Against this background, negative emotions appear, confidence in one's own strengths and abilities decreases, and various physical and mental health problems become visible. Also, an unhealthy activity environment, characterized by excessive control, unfriendly and toxic environment, poorly organized, can quickly lead to burnout. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major negative impact on the well-being of individuals, causing many worries, fears, emotional stress, anxiety, burnout and even depression (Alrawashdeh et al., 2021, 2).

Figure 1. The burnout syndrome dynamics
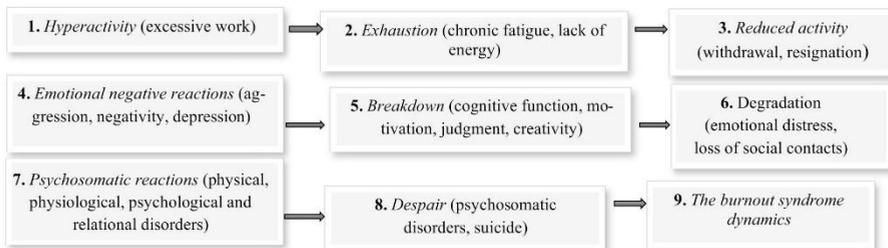
Source: Weber and Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000, 514.

It should be remembered that burnout is a dynamic process, from its appearance and manifestation to diagnosis and adequate treatment

(Dunford et al., 2012; Weber and Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000; Gavish and Friedman, 2010) (see Figure 1).

In short, the burnout syndrome sums up three major stages of the manifestation of symptoms, as follows: I. general exhaustion, caused by overwork; II depersonalization, adopting a cynical attitude and the appearance of impersonal feelings; III. decreased performance, difficulty concentrating, inefficiency in daily activities (Maslach et. al., 1986) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The stages of burnout syndrome vary from one individual to another, but there are some similarities
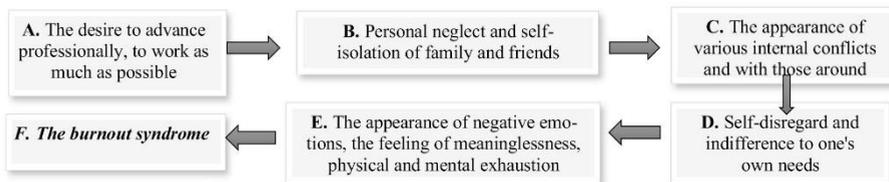
Source: Maslach et. al., 1986; Carod-Artal and Vázquez-Cabrera, 2013; Freudenberger, 1974.

What are the main risk factors favoring the appearance and manifestation of burnout?

With the restrictions during the pandemic, working from home became mandatory, so that after the lifting of the restrictions, it will remain in the options of many employees and employers. It is about a new dynamic dictated in work, as well as the acceleration of the change of work relations (Molina-Praena et al., 2018; Aydemir and Icelli, 2013). In addition to the multiple advantages of turning personal home into an office, there are also some disadvantages such as: overwork, the inability to differentiate between free time and work, the employer's excessive control over the employee's activity and results, various abuses by the employer, isolation of the employee from his colleagues, insufficient or absent feedback from superiors (Bria et al., 2012). In other words, on the one hand, the employee's mobility is increased by working remotely (from anywhere), but on the other hand, it can affect productivity, mood, the appearance of feelings of confusion, exhaustion, loneliness and burnout.

Working from home was suddenly imposed as a form of protecting the health of the population in the first two years of the pandemic. Time

dedicated to work and time at home have become, in some situations, one and the same thing (Hayes et al., 2021; Joshi and Sharma, 2020). Suddenly, movement restrictions and quarantine brought to the fore the relocation of the work space to the employee's residence, where this was possible. This change had a major impact on employees, involving the ability to adapt and respond, but especially the creation of a separate space and time for home and work (Fajri and Haerudin, 2022; Queen and Harding, 2020). Thus, isolation and social distancing led, in some cases, to an increase in the level of stress and exhaustion at work, which inevitably leads to burnout. In addition to the benefit of eliminating the commute between home and workplace, working from home implies a series of disadvantages, such as: lack of interactions between colleagues, lack of physical separation between home and work, isolation of employees, but especially eliminating the difference between professional life and personal life (Hoffman et al., 2020).

However, it cannot be said that remote work is a main factor in the occurrence of employee burnout. We are, therefore, talking about a multitude, an amalgam of favourable factors that lead to the appearance and manifestation of burnout, but here the defining characteristics of each person's personality, as well as his emotional and cognitive resources, must also be included. In general, apart from the location at work, there are a number of factors favoring the occurrence and manifestation of the burnout syndrome (see Table 1).

Table 1. The main risk factors of burnout for the employee

Burnout: risk factors for the employee
→ Very high workload
→ Poor adaptation to the new and fear of change
→ Old age
→ Low self-esteem
→ Sudden changes and very strict rules imposed on employees
→ Poor work organization
→ Financial issues
→ Personal problems
→ Too many and too high requirements for employees
→ The insecurity of tomorrow at work
→ Lack of free time
→ Zero chances of advancing to a higher position

Burnout: risk factors for the employee
→ Very low salary
→ Stressful work environment
→ Lack of encouragement and support from superiors
→ Too much pressure that superiors put on employees
→ Competitive and malicious attitude of colleagues
→ Unrealistic expectations of both the employee and the superiors

Source: Carod-Artal and Vázquez-Cabrera, 2013, 16.

In addition to the major, unprecedented changes imposed by the pandemic on the labour market and in the way of working, physical and emotional exhaustion has become an important component of studies and, at the same time, a trending diagnosis among the employees (Anjum et al., 2020). As Maslach points out, *chronic exhaustion* is a very serious problem with consequences over time and occurs as a result of the worker's prolonged exposure to one or more of the following aspects of a *toxic work environment* (see Table 2).

Table 2. The principal elements of a toxic work environment, which can cause burnout

Main elements	*Short explanation*
a) Work	→ Too much work and without the possibility of relaxation and rest
b) Compensation	→ Insufficient or delayed compensation
c) Control	→ Excessive control
d) Values	→ Employee is forced to act against his own values
e) Fairness	→ The existence of inequities at the workplace
f) Community	→ The community of employees that is not united

Source: Maslach, 1998; Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach and Leiter, 2008; Maslach, 2018.

Depending on the multitude and complexity of demands from the workplace and the available resources, one can talk about employee well-being or burnout. This is the *Job Demands-Resources model*, which can be explained by job resources and job demands (Demerouti et al., 2001; Hakanen et al., 2008). The resources available at the workplace, referring to all aspects of job organization, can reduce demands and especially the associated physical and mental costs and can stimulate motivation and the achievement of objectives. On the other hand, job demands refer to the

physical and mental efforts that the employee must make. Also, motivation, dedication, enthusiasm and pride are some of the most important aspects of a positive work environment necessary for the employee (Schaufeli, 2017; Llorens et al., 2006; Adil and Baig, 2018). Thus, by focusing on the positive aspects and by strengthening them, burnout at work can be prevented, avoided among employees.

What are the consequences of burnout ?

If left untreated, burnout can lead to complications such as depression. The signs of burnout are relatively similar to those of depression, dying for which some confusion can be created. The mixture of chronic fatigue, apathy, lack of energy and low productivity are signs of burnout but can be easily overlooked as signs of *workplace depression* (Schonfeld et al., 2018, 218-219).

The signs and consequences of burnout syndrome are very wide and different, and their manifestation is different from one individual to another, but there are some small generalities (Norlund, et al., 2010). Depending on the age, gender, the degree of stress resistance, personal resources and personal life experiences of each individual, can influence the appearance, definition and manifestation of the burnout syndrome at individual, organizational or relational level (Stanetić and Tešanović, 2013; Maslach, 2018).

There are several types of burnouts, such as: 1) individual burnout; 2) burnout at the organizational level; 3) burnout at the relational level. Individual burnout can be characterized by expectations and standards that are too high and inconsistent with available own resources, at which point the stress level may increase (Van Dierendonck et al., 1998; Kelchtermans and Strittmatter, 1999; Janssen et al., 1999). *Organizational burnout* usually occurs where the work environment is toxic, where employees are exploited to the maximum and kept under constant stress (Chamberlain et al., 2016; Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004). *Relational burnout* can take place in the family, in the circle of friends or between colleagues and is translated by difficult, often conflicting relationships (Pickett et al., 2017; Aydogan and Kizildag, 2017) (see Table 3).

**Table 3. The main consequences of the burnout syndrome at individual,
organizational and relational level**

1.	*Main consequences*
Individual level	Apathy, passivity, creating a mental block
	Depression and panic attacks
	Difficulty in managing daily activities
	Increasing physical and mental sensitivity
	Stagnation, exhaustion and helplessness
	Lack of future plans and desire for success
	Anger and frustration

Source: Maslach and Leiter, 2016; Weber, Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000; Kelchtermans and Strittmatter, 1999; Alemany Martínez et al., 2008.

2.	*Main consequences*
Organizational level	Disappearance of satisfaction with work and depersonalization
	Feeling of permanent fatigue and difficulty concentrating and decrease or disappearance of initiatives and ideas in teamwork: exhaustion, helplessness, apathy
	Self-insulation and increasing the number of sick leave and unmotivated absences
	Recourse to shelters such as: consumption of alcohol and / or other substances with psychotropic effects and decreased of productivity and the ability to solve problems
	Decreased self-confidence and self-strength and acute fear of not making mistakes, of not being laughed at, feeling overwhelmed
	Loss of meaning and fear of new challenges and the appearance of various behavioural disorders like: eating disorders, sleep disorders, depression etc.

Source: Bridgeman et al., 2018; Chirico, 2016; Chamberlain et al., 2016; Molassiotis, Haberman, 1996.

1.	*Main consequences*
Relational level	Often misunderstandings and lack of reaction and desire to withdraw
	Conflicts are becoming more frequent and the appearance of aggressive and inappropriate reactions: rage and frustration
	Difficult relationships and fear of trusting the other: withdrawal and isolation
	Lack of effective communication and constant misunderstandings
	Insulation and self-closing, fear of communicating or returning to a relationship
	Differences in vision and understanding: boredom social isolation, sadness and apathy

Source: Aydogan and Kizildag, 2017; Trindade et al., 2010; Kulkarni, 2006; Malaquin et al., 2017.

Burnout: What are the main methods and techniques of prevention and treatment?

The individual characteristics of each person can have a greater or lesser influence on the appearance and manifestation of burnout. There are many factors that contribute to the occurrence and manifestation of the burnout syndrome. But it can include a series of somatic and psychological disorders and some social and relational dysfunctions (Lyall, 1989). In general, the diagnosis of burnout involves *three categories of symptoms*, as follows: 1) physical symptoms, which include exhaustion and the development of physical dysfunctions that can even lead to the appearance of diseases; 2) psychological symptoms, which include low self-esteem, emotional exhaustion, disinterest in itself and everything around; 3) symptoms related to behaviour, which include depersonalization, decreased productivity at work, dissatisfaction with the results of work performed, general disinterest (Gold, 1985). Since each individual is different and exhibits different symptoms of the same burnout syndrome, diagnosis and treatment are individualized. Thus, there is no standard diagnosis or treatment that can be applied to every individual suffering from burnout syndrome (West et al., 2018).

Depending on personality, available resources and environment, the manifestation of the burnout symptoms palette is varied (Kaschka et al., 2011, 783). The diagnosis of the burnout syndrome must consider a series of elements such as: the medical history, the particular symptomatology of the individual, the history of alcohol and/or drug consumption, various specific laboratory tests, psychometric tests (for example, the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* - MBI), the socio-professional history (Weber and Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000, 515).

Diagnosing and identifying the most suitable treatment according to the characteristics and resources of the individual, as well as adjusting the therapy, involve a process in itself. The diagnosis involves the identification of the factors that facilitated and led to the emergence and manifestation of the burnout syndrome, such as, for example: the work environment, working time and time for rest and relaxation, the employer's demands on the employee, the objectives set at work, the organization of work, the resources available at the workplace and those available to the employee etc. Achieving the balance between work and rest hours involves identifying the moments when the employee tends to give up his own needs in favour of excessive work (see Table 4).

Table 4. The main general strategies of psychological intervention in the treatment of burnout syndrome

The general strategies of psychological intervention for treating burnout		
Goal	*Individual strategies*	*Organizational strategies*
Diagnosis	Self-assessment	Psychosocial health audit
Primary prevention	Time management Social skills training Work-life balance	Job content improvement Working hours Managerial development
Secondary prevention	Improvement groups Coaching and consultation	Anticipatory socialization Organizational development
Therapy prevention / Treatment	Counselling Psychotherapy	Institutionalization of Occupational Health and Safety services

Source: Salanova and Llorens, 2008, 63.

However, there are several relevant questionnaires for establishing a diagnosis, and one of the most common is the MBI (see Appendix 1, Part 1 and Appendix 1, Part 2), being customized according to certain professional groups of individuals. Unfortunately, these questionnaires make it difficult to distinguish between burnout and depression, or other psychological problems such as, for example, anxiety with its somatic forms of manifestation (Maslach, 2018; Maslach et al., 1986; Vachon et al., 1997) (see Table 5).

Table 5. Burnout syndrome: Brief review of the main coordinates regarding prevention, diagnosis and treatment

Prevention: *General directions*	**Diagnosis:** *Most frequent symptoms*	**Treatment:** *The main cardinal points*
The importance of rest	Sleep disorders and low level of energy resources	Giving due importance to sleep hours
Physical activities	Decrease in productivity at work and degradation of physical and mental health	Avoiding to overwork and following the treatment and therapy process recommended by the specialist
Healthy diet	Eating disorders	Avoiding food excesses and adopting a personalized healthy diet
Allowing free time	Somatic disorders and decreased quality of life:	Identification of symptoms by a specialist and allowing

Prevention: *General directions*	Diagnosis: *Most frequent symptoms*	Treatment: *The main cardinal points*
	compulsive work without free time	time to carry out the treatment
Carrying out activities that give pleasure with the close ones	Dysfunctions in interrelationship and dissatisfaction with personal life	Developing and cultivating healthy relationships and reporting correctly to those around you
Recharging the batteries	Emotional exhaustion and loss of interest in any type of activity	Development of methods and techniques to reduce fears and stress
Obtaining constructive feedback from superiors at work	Lack of interest in work and low achievement	Selecting what is important and avoiding exhausting itself on unnecessary activities
Giving due importance to the family and friends	Various negative emotions	Changing the attitude towards loved ones
Creating a network of friends	No personal life and self-isolation	Capitalizing on interpersonal relationships
High degree of satisfaction with daily activities and planning for the future	Low self-esteem and general loss of interest	Respecting itself and gradually building self-confidence
Exploitation of one or more hobbies	Negative attitudes regarding life and itself	Searching and implementing methods of managing negative attitudes and strategies to combat stress at work
Maintaining a general positive attitude at work and in life	Setting unrealistic targets and overload at work and depersonalization	Giving accommodation time to implement new things in personal life and at work
Patience and tolerance towards itself and attention to the supervision of psychological and mental health	The appearance and ignoring psychological disorders	Identification and appropriate treatment of health problems
Maintaining a healthy lifestyle without excesses	The neglect of personal needs and desires	Changing the attitude towards itself and towards work and planning a work and rest schedule

Source: Couper, 2005; Vachon et al., 1997; Amanullah et al., 2017; Gabbe et al., 2002; Kakiashvili et al., 2013.

Most of the time, burnout syndrome is associated with a poor state of health, with various psychosomatic disorders, with chronic fatigue and exhaustion. Thus, progressive damage due to work without rest and free time seems to be the main cause of burnout (Lloyd et al., 2013; Montero-Marín et al., 2016, 231).

Therapies for treating burnout syndrome must be adapted according to the defining and, at the same time, distinct characteristics of each individual (Korczak et al., 2018; Ochentel et al., 2018). However, there is a series of therapies developed over time, and which continue to be developed and improved according to the new coordinates dictated by the changes taking place worldwide. For example, *cognitive behavioural therapy* is a common method in the treatment of burnout syndrome, being a way of changing thinking and managing tension factors that produce stress (Montero-Marín et al., 2016) (see Table 6).

Table 6. The main characteristics regarding therapies which can be applied for the burnout syndrome treatment

Main therapies	Short description
The cognitive behavioral therapy	It is brought to the fore, the change of the individual's thinking and the management of stressful factors. Practically, changing the attitude towards tense and stressful situations that lead to burnout.
Physical exercises, sports therapy	The focus on the physical and mental benefits of regular physical exercise and sports. The tension is removed and replaced with a state of well-being.
Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy	The aim is to change the distorted cognitive-emotional concepts, which are the basis of exhaustion and chronic fatigue. This therapy targets the ability to adapt (maladaptive cognitions and negative emotions), by: training resistance to stress, developing new adaptation capacities, various behavioral and interaction techniques. The so-called mental toughness is used to describe achieving success and overcoming obstacles, which means increased resistance to stress factors.
Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy	Awareness, identification and management of negative emotions is the main goal. This type of therapy was designed to be able to train the individual's ability not to return to the depressive state. Depressive relapse is associated with returning to negative thinking. Thus, mindfulness is important in recognizing these negative emotions and correcting them, being able to be applied in the therapy of burnout syndrome.

Main therapies	Short description
Traditional yoga	In the case of managing and combating chronic stress, yoga has a beneficial role, contributing to improving the physical and mental state. It is about improving the quality of life and overall health care.
Original targeted therapy	Very briefly, targeted therapy means identifying, blocking and treating specific symptoms, being a type of therapy with a wide spectrum of applicability, which is why it can also be used in the treatment of burnout syndrome.

Source: Montero-Marín et al., 2016; Weber and Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000; Ochentel et al., 2018; Ogbuanya et al., 2019; Grensman et al., 2018; Grigorescu et al., 2020.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the quality of life, forcing an increase in the degree of resistance to stress factors (Alrawashdeh et al., 2021, 3). The multiple globalized crises gradually begin to become a lifestyle, while individuals learn to cultivate and train their ability to identify symptoms and manage burnout. It is a global challenge, and the final impact is unknown and difficult to anticipate, due to the unpredictability with which it affected all aspects of life, the economy, health, society and interpersonal relations.

Working from home, during the pandemic, requires a change in the work environment, an emotional fund driven by fears and uncertainties, but also additional requests from the job. Thus, the differentiation between the space at home and that at work has become difficult to differentiate (Peeters et al, 2005). We are talking about physical, mental, social and financial consequences for the employee.

Stress and exhaustion at work, in today's society, are extremely serious problems and must be treated as such, because they can lead to burnout syndrome. Therefore, burnout is considered a fashionable diagnosis these days. Both the research and the identification of the symptoms, as well as the treatment, are a real challenge in the context of the new coordinates given by the current changes produced on an international scale regarding work, society and interrelationship (Weber and Jaekel-Reinhard, 2000). There are many changes in the field of work that have been imposed internationally due to the pandemic, creating an amalgam of adaptation challenges for all employees. (Montero-Marín et al., 2016).

The burnout syndrome is often related to the toxic work environment, unavailable or limited resources, low remuneration, job and organizational dissatisfaction, low resistance to stress and lack of adaptation to new situational challenges. Therefore, the burnout syndrome is an extremely complex multifactorial phenomenon, which implies increased attention in the process of identification, diagnosis and treatment.

The increased interest in research and analysis of the complexity of the burnout syndrome, especially in the work environment, demonstrates the importance and topicality of the subject. Also, with the changes occurring in all areas of life, burnout raises new future challenges, being characterized by the dynamics of these many and continuous turns.

Authorship

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*** Burnout: Self-Test Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), available online at: https://monkeypuzzletraining.co.uk/free-downloads/Burnout-Self-Test-Inventory(MBI).pdf, retrived on July 21st, 10:27.

Appendix 1. Part 1. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), General Self-Test regarding work

Box 2. Short introduction to The Maslach Burnout Inventory

„The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is the most commonly used tool to self-assess whether you might be at risk of burnout. To determine the risk of burnout, the MBI explores three components: exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal achievement. While this tool may be useful, it must not be used as a clinical diagnostic technique, regardless of the results. The objective is simply to make you aware that anyone may be at risk of burnout. For each question, indicate the score that corresponds to your response relevant to that time. Add up your score for each section and compare your results with the scoring results interpretation at the bottom of this document".

Source: Burnout: Self-Test Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), available online at: https://monkey-puzzletraining.co.uk/free-downloads/Burnout-Self-Test-Inventory(MBI).pdf, retrieved on July 21st, 10:27.

Self-Test MBI. Table 1, Section A, MBI

Questions	Never	A Few Times per Year	Once a Month	A Few Times per Month	Once a Week	A Few Times per Week	Every Day
SECTION A	*0*	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*
I am feel emotionally drained by my work.							
Working with people all daylong requires a great deal of effort.							
I feel like my work is breaking me down.							
I feel frustrated by my work.							
I feel that I work too hard at my job.							
It stresses me too much to work in direct contact with people.							
I feel like I am at the end of my tether.							
Sub scores							
Section A Total Score							

Table 2, Section B, MBI

Questions	Never	A Few Times per Year	Once a Month	A Few Times per Month	Once a Week	A Few Times per Week	Every Day
SECTION B	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
I feel I deal with colleagues or clients impersonally, as if they were objects.							
I feel tired when I get up in the morning and have to face another day at work.							
I have the impression that my colleagues or clients make me responsible for some of their problems.							
I am at the end of my patience at the end of my work day.							
I really don't care about what happens to some of my colleagues/ clients.							
I am more insensitive to people I was working with.							
I am afraid that the job was making me uncaring.							
Sub scores							
Section B Total Score							

Table 3, Section C, MBI

Questions	Never	A Few Times per Year	Once a Month	A Few Times per Month	Once a Week	A Few Times per Week	Every Day
SECTION C	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
I have accomplished many worthwhile things in the job.							
I feel full of energy.							

Questions	Never	A Few Times per Year	Once a Month	A Few Times per Month	Once a Week	A Few Times per Week	Every Day
I can easily understand what my colleagues or clients feel.							
I look after my colleagues' or clients' problems very effectively.							
In my work, I handle emotional problems very calmly.							
Through my work, I feel that I have a positive influence on people.							
I am easily able to create a relaxed atmosphere with my colleagues or clients.							
I feel refreshed when I have been close to my colleagues or clients at work.							
Sub scores							
Section C Total Score							

Source: Burnout: Self-Test Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), available online at: https://monkey-puzzletraining.co.uk/free-downloads/Burnout-Self-Test-Inventory(MBI).pdf, retrieved on July 21st, 10:27.

Appendix 1, Part 2. Brief interpretation of the results on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), General Self-Test regarding work

„How to interpret the scores: Burnout involves three main components; emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and lack of achievement. In each section your scores will indicate the level of burnout you are experiencing ranging from Low-level burnout, moderate burnout or high-level burnout. You can compare your scores in each section below and find advice to help you manage your level of burnout".

Source: Burnout: How to interpret the scores for The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), General Self-Test regarding work, available online at: monkeypuzzletraining.co.uk/burnout-inventory-results, retrieved on July 21st, 12:19.

The interpretation of the results MBI. Section A, MBI: Emotional Exhaustion

⇒ Total 17 or less: Low-level burnout,
⇒ Total between 18 and 29 inclusive: Moderate burnout,
⇒ Total over 30: High-level burnout.

Emotional exhaustion is perhaps easiest to spot, you increasingly become tired more quickly and unable to bounce back in the way you normally would. Time off work and weekends no longer help you to feel refreshed.

✓ To resolve emotional exhaustion:

1. Ruthlessly prioritise,
2. Practice general good self-care; meditate, exercise (gently), eat well, get outside in nature, get sleep, but go easy on yourself and avoid becoming compulsive about your self care routines.

Section B, MBI: Depersonalisation

⇒ Total 5 or less: Low-level burnout,
⇒ Total between 6 and 11 inclusive: Moderate burnout,
⇒ Total of 12 and greater: High-level burnout.

Depersonalisation happens when, as a result of burnout, you detach from the relational aspect of your work because is it too draining. This often happens unconsciously and you may find it manifests itself in you becoming increasingly cynical, distant and unable to deal with the 'people' aspect of your work.

✓ To resolve depersonalisation:

1. Talk to people who can understand and avoid those who drain your energy,
2. If other people are too much - write in a journal.

Section C, MBI: Lack of Personal Achievement

⇒ Total 33 or less: High-level burnout,
⇒ Total between 34 and 39 inclusive: Moderate burnout,
⇒ Total greater than 40: Low-level burnout.

Experiencing a lack of achievement may be real or imagined, but you often no longer get satisfaction from achieving things in your role. This may cause you to become despondent or question whether the role is for you.

✓ To resolve lack of personal achievement:

1. 'Be bothered' on the things that really matter,
2. Know your triggers to entering into compulsive work.

Source: Burnout: How to interpret the scores for The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), General Self-Test regarding work, available online at: monkeypuzzletraining.co.uk/ burnout-inventory-results, retrieved on July 21st, 12:19.

SUSTAINABILITY RELATED VALUES IN FAMILY-FRIENDLY ORGANIZATIONS

Anna PÁTKAI BENDE[1]
Julianna FEJES-NÁDAI[2]

Abstract*: The focus of the study is to examine the set of values of family-friendly organizations in Hungary. The study highlights the importance of organizational values as a fundamental part of corporate culture, which can be a major competitive advantage for companies. Values at the organizational level not only influence employees' behaviour but also play an important role in strategic decision-making. Based on the results of a questionnaire survey carried out in spring 2023, this study demonstrates, which values dominate among organizations with the label Family-Friendly Workplace in Hungary and which are the priorities that influence their decisions. The research is meant to prove that a number of values related to social and environmental sustainability are considered in the basic principles of the organizations involved in the survey. They regard the family, support for families and work-life balance as core values. Beside family-related values, other important principles are included, such as equal opportunities, social responsibility and support for disadvantaged social groups. In addition, environmental sustainability and environmental awareness are strongly reflected in the values of family-friendly organizations.*

Keywords: *family-friendly organizations, organizational culture, organizational values, social sustainability, environmental sustainability*

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Introduction

Nowadays, balancing work and family life is a daily challenge for most employees. The study of the relationship between work and family life became the focus of scientific researches in the second half of the 20th century, parallel to the increasing participation of women in the labor market and the spread of the two-earner family model (Allen & Martin, 2017). Researches have shown that the two areas of life are strongly related (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). Individuals have to manage both work and family, which can lead to conflicts between their work and family roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Recently, the issue of balancing work and family life has become the focus of interest and thus, the role of family-friendly organizations is becoming increasingly important. The formulation of family-friendly organizations can be regarded as a form of corporate social responsibility (Bognár et al., 2014). According to previous studies, a workplace can be considered family-friendly if it facilitates the employees of a company to combine work with their family responsibilities (Székely et al., 2019).

Global international organizations, like the United Nations, explored the significance of social issues strongly connected to human harmonic life between private and organizational spheres. Through their activities, family-friendly organizations can make a significant contribution to achieving some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) set by the United Nations in 2015 (Kovács et al., 2023). Among the Sustainable Development Goals, Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3) and Gender Equality (SDG 5) goals are the most aligned with the activities of family-friendly workplaces. Family-friendly organizations support their employees with a range of measures that promote work-life balance, maintain physical, mental health and well-being, as well as equal opportunities.

UNICEF, harmonized with the SDGs, issued a recommendation package on how workplaces can implement more family friendly policies. It is a guidance for businesses in creating family-friendly workplaces in their own operations and in their supply chains (unicef.org) and its results are beneficial for families, employers and business.

Family-friendly workplaces offer their employees flexible working arrangements, such as flexible working hours, part-time work or home

office. They also provide extra-statutory leave and leave for family reasons like parental leave, for example by keeping contact with them during their absence and offering them mentoring programs after their return. Employees with young children are supported by child-friendly office environment, workplace nursery and summer camps for children. The family-friendly initiatives also include children's and family days and various family oriented programs. In addition, more and more family-friendly organizations take preventive health measures such as screening programs and sports activities for employees (Bognár et al., 2014; Fail et al., 2015).

To get a deeper understanding of the concept of values we have to conceptualize the term that is possible from several aspects. The concept has not just one definition but rather some approaches by current and former international researchers investigating various issues in business context, like values of entrepreneurs (Garai & Nádai, 2015).

According to Rokeach a value is 'an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of control' (Rokeach, 1973: 5). Based on Chatman's (1991) researches we can state that value fit between the person and the organization is related to commitment. Family-friendly workplaces also introduced arrangements preferable by employees to make them loyal and committed to work and to the organization.

In terms of organizations, values are indicative of the most defining characteristics of an institution (Williams, 1979). Hill and Jones (2001) define organizational values as believes and ideas on the goals organization members should pursue, and also, ideas about the proper standards of behavior organizational members should use to achieve corporate goals. Shine (2010) ads predicted behavior to the term saying that rules have been established by organizational leaders who expect organizational members to adhere to them, and these rules make it possible to predict behavior.

Individual and corporate values may overlap which leads to an ideal situation both for employees and employers. The individual's perception of the organization's values is arguably more important to predicting individual behaviour (Judge & Cable, 1997). Management style of leaders of various organizations are 'value driven' (Chatman, 2017), just like that in family-friendly workplaces. The mutual interest of leadership and employees is to form a common ground for cooperation and this is mostly

the shared values. Value based models are also applied and followed in other organizational perspectives, like Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility (Camilleri, 2017).

The present study examines the organizational values of family-friendly organizations and whether these values are compatible with family-friendly policies and sustainability.

Research Methodology and Sampling

The study is based on the results of a questionnaire survey conducted in 2023 in each organization carrying the „Family Friendly Workplace" label (FFW) and seated in Hungary (702 organisations altogether). No other types of organisations were involved in the research as it is aimed to reveal specific value sets of FFWs. Each organisation has a seat only in Hungary, but the owners are Hungarians as well as foreign proprietors. The research included a comprehensive examination of the family-friendly aspect, but this study only presents the results related to corporate values.

The questions in the survey are divided into 15 basic groups concerning the main topics. Family-friendly corporate values are one of these thematic units beside others, such as practices and arrangements of family friendly organisations, corporate communication, effects of COVID-19 pandemic or Corporate Social Responsibilities. The present study is meant to delve into the main values of these organisations concerning family and work balance.

The survey included open ended and multiple choice questions. Open questions enable the participants to give a detailed answer according to their preference and share all items of information they consider important. Multiple choice questions, nevertheless, make the respondents express their opinion in a more directed and focused way. Using combined types of questions made the processing of the responses more complicated, however, it contributed to attaining a more complex view on the issue of corporate values in FFWs.

The questionnaire was sent online to 702 employers certified as FFWs, and a total of 116 people – each representing a different organisation – filled in the questionnaire and provided data on the topics. The reasons for the relatively low rate of willingness to participate was not investigated.

Regarding positions, the responses were received mainly from owners, top managers, human resource managers and human resources employees. The composition of the sample according to sectors and the number of employees are shown in Table 1.

Almost half of the participants came from the business sector, but numerous state and municipal actors as well as organizations from the non-profit sector were also invited to take part in the survey. Most respondents (54) were employers with 1-49 employees, about the third of the respondents (38) were organizations with 50-249 employees, while large companies had the lowest proportion represented by 24 respondents. The settlements where the organisations are seated also represent each type of settlements that exist in Hungary.

In the next chapter, we are analysing the results of the questionnaire to get an insight into the value preferences of family-friendly organizations.

Table 1. **Characteristics of family-friendly organisations (n=116)**

	N	Percent (%)
SPHERE		
Business	55	47,4
State/municipal	46	39,7
Civil/non-profit	11	9,5
Church	4	3,4
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES		
1-9	12	10,3
10-49	42	36,2
50-249	38	32,8
> 250	24	20,7
SETTLEMENT		
Capital city	16	13,8
County city	50	43,1
Other city	43	37,1
Town	7	6,0

Source: self edited 2024.

Value preferences of family-friendly organizations

The whole research attained information on 15 topics that are of interest regarding FFWs, and one unit of the survey included questions on value preferences of employees in economic, state and civil organisations. In the present paper we wish to give an overview of these values as they serve as a basis for FFWs and make them appealing to the employees. In this chapter we are presenting the results attained from the answers related to the issue.

We asked the participants about the three most important values which are typical of their organizations, form the basis of its functioning and represent a core value for them. The most important values are shown in Figure 1 below. In the figure only answers from 107 respondents are depicted since there were answers which are not significant expressed in percentages so they are ignored in the present paper.

The questionnaire survey clearly demonstrated that the most fundamental value for family-friendly organizations is supporting families and communities. The question received 107 responses, almost 40% of which contained phrases emphasizing the importance of family and family-friendly approach, such as 'family-friendliness', 'family-friendly operation', 'family-friendly environment', 'family priority', 'children are the future', 'children, family consideration', 'family support'. The values of family-friendly employers emphasized 'work-life balance' and 'work-family balance'. This indicates that it is extremely important for respondents to support the employees in reconciling work and family life. Community and community-building are also key values for family-friendly employer organisations. 28% of the respondents mentioned these in some form, such as 'creating a supportive workplace community', 'a good community', 'teamwork', 'cooperation', 'collaboration', 'mutual support'.

In addition to values supporting family and community, those related to sustainability and responsibility (36.5%) and equal opportunities (23.4%) – which are closely linked – are dominant. The results show that family-friendly organizations share a set of values which demonstrate their commitment to social and environmental sustainability. On the one hand, family-friendly employers interpret responsibility as 'responsibility towards their employees', 'responsible thinking' and 'responsible employment'. Some respondents (8.4%) highlighted 'employee health' and

'employee well-being' as values. On the other hand, they emphasized not only responsibility towards employees, but also social responsibility towards local communities and their commitment to promoting equal opportunities, too. The values of family-friendly organizations include the necessity of supporting disadvantaged social groups, such as 'helping mothers returning from parental leave to get into work', 'increased protection for women', 'support for people with disabilities' or even 'helping the socially disadvantaged'. Sustainability responses stressed the importance of 'environmental sustainability', 'environmental protection', 'environmental programs' and 'sustainable development'. One family-friendly organization mentioned 'motivating employees to work together for environmental protection and environmental sustainability' as a core value, while another respondent puts it this way: 'Our organization is gradually taking significant steps towards a more sustainable world, starting with the local community'.

Other values are also considered crucial, like stability, long-term job security and reliability (22.4%): 'We ensure a stable, reliable workplace'. Furthermore, values such as 'innovation' (11.2%), 'quality' (9.3%), 'flexibility' (7.5%) or 'commitment and loyalty' (6.5%) are also essential for family-friendly organizatons.

Figure 1. **Core values of family-friendly organizations (n=107)**
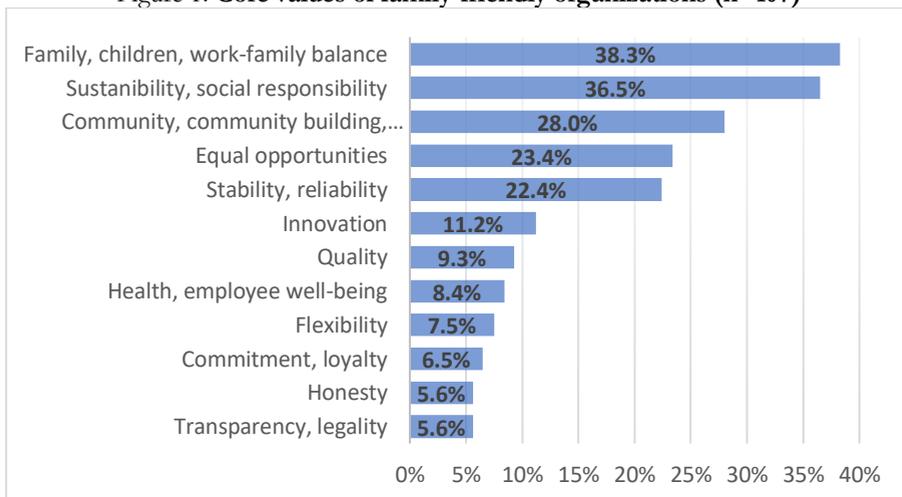
Source: self edited, 2024

Based on Figure 1 it is clear that values mentioned by the FFWs are variable and sumptuous. It is notable to see that transparency, honesty and loyalty are considered much less important (ca 5%) values than family and working sphere balance (>30%). Socially more sensitive features (e.g. stability, social responsibility, communities) are perceived as something strongly appreciated, while those directly connected to work are obviously held less valued.

The surveying process faced some limitations of the research. The request for filling in the survey and reminders of doing so were sent to the organizations three times. Despite, only 16.5% of the potential respondents provided data which lead to a limited possibility of generalization based on the results. However, the number of respondents (116) is still high which made it possible to conduct a reliable research. The demographic data do not contain gender and age which might be useful in an extended research in the future. Despite these limitations the study offers a relevant insight into the value system of organizations with the Family Friendly Workplace label.

Conclusions

The study drew attention to the importance of values which serve as a compass not only in the everyday lives of individuals, but also in those of organizations. The values presented at the organizational level as an integral part of the corporate culture represent a significant competitive advantage for companies, so addressing this issue is important.

The study examined organizations that carry the „Family Friendly Workplace" label in Hungary with regard to which values form the basis of their organizational culture. Family-friendly activities contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals, such as Gender Equality, Good Health and Well-Being. Within this framework, they carry out a range of activities to support their own employees on the one hand and local communities on the other (Pátkai Bende & Nárai, 2023).

This study confirms that family-friendly organizations' commitment to family-friendly approach and sustainability is not only reflected in their corporate practices, but is much more deeply anchored in their corporate culture and values. In the family-friendly organizations examined, the

dominance of family and community-related values can be observed: family, family-friendly approach and community support form the basis of their daily operation. Research shows that family-friendly employers consider responsibility and sustainability as core principles in addition to family and community values. In addition to taking responsibility for one's own employees and family members, special attention is paid to supporting local communities, supporting disadvantaged social groups and other efforts to ensure equal opportunities. Furthermore, social sustainability, environmental sustainability and environmental protection are also core values for them.

To extend the value focused part of the survey it would be interesting to see how demographic data, such as age and gender influence the respondents' answers. And furthermore, a study on the preferable values in the examined types of organizations could be also investigated to understand potential differences.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no conflicting interests.

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THE SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN'S INTERESTS IN THE ROMANIAN PARLIAMENT.
2012-2016 AND 2016-2020 LEGISLATURE

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Abstract: *This study examines the substantive representation of women's interests in the Romanian Parliament during the 2012-2016 and 2016-2020 legislatures. It explores how the increased presence of women parliamentarians influenced legislative initiatives related to improving birth rate. The analysis reveals a shift from financial incentives to measures promoting work-life balance, reflecting a greater focus on reconciling women's professional and family lives during the second legislature when the descriptive representation of women parliamentarians almost doubled. Using content analysis and logistic regression models, the study highlights the correlation between descriptive and substantive representation, emphasizing the need for policies that support women's autonomy and gender equality. The findings suggest that while the increased presence of women led to more legislative proposals adopted, the political affiliation with National Liberal Party and initiation during the second legislature, in conjunction with the mandate of Social Democratic Party-Alliance of Liberals and Democrats Government led by a woman, are significant predictors for their adoption. Although the presence of women in Parliament is crucial for improving the substantive representation of women's interests, it does not guarantee legislative success. Further studies should analyze, using complementary research methods, what factors blocked the adoption of these initiatives and how the transformation of initiatives that promote women's interests into laws can be facilitated in the future.*
Keywords*: substantive representation, descriptive representation, legislative initiatives, political parties, women's interests, work-life balance policies, women-friendly policies*

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Introduction

Women have been historically assigned to the domestic sphere, responsible for household chores and child-rearing, while the public sphere of work, politics, and decision-making was a male-dominated field. Early feminist writings (Astell, 1700; Wollstonecraft, 1792) advocated for women's right to equal education as men, believing that this would facilitate women's access to professions and occupations in the labor market. As socio-economic inequalities remained unchanged, during the 19th century women sought to obtain the right to vote and be elected so that they could include their voice in shaping history and contribute to changing practices that oppressed them. Political rights were acquired by women in most countries at the beginning of the 20th century, but their progress towards gender equality in political participation is still limited. Currently, only 6 out of the 193 countries for which data is available have parliaments where women represent at least half of the total number of parliamentarians, while only 15 out of 193 states have gender-balanced governments and only 26 states are led by a woman (CFR, 2024).

Although the gap between women and men in terms of education has narrowed, this has not led to a decrease in the income gap between them. Even in the 59 countries where women are more educated than men, the average income gap is 39% in favor of men, these disparities being correlated with deeply rooted social norms and gender stereotypes that suggest women should dedicate more time to childcare and domestic work than men (PNUD, 2023). Thus, regardless of the level of education, in countries with a low tendency towards prejudice, the time spent by women on unpaid care work is twice as much as the time allocated by men, and as the bias increases, women in these countries allocate up to six times more time than men (PNUD, 2023). Family responsibilities can also be an impediment to women's access to political positions, being a criterion in the selection of female candidates for parliament by political parties and their voters, those with more traditional values considering marriage and children an advantage for men and a disadvantage for women who are expected to be more involved in childcare (Norris, Lovenduski, 1993) and, therefore, to have less time for work outside the household.

Romania ranks 117th out of 193 states in the women's power index (CFR, 2024), while the gender social norms index reveals 85.84% of Romanians

with bias, men in a higher proportion than women, 51.71% of Romanians consider men to make better political leaders than women, and 53.49% believe men make better business leaders than women (PNUD, 2023).

The literature on women's political representation shows, however, that their presence in decision-making forums leads to the adoption of measures that prioritize women's economic, social, and personal interests (Celis, 2009; Wängnerud, 2000), a higher proportion of women in decision-making bodies constituting the premises for adopting policies that promote women's interests, including the reconciliation of women's professional life with family life.

This study aims to analyze the legislative proposals initiated by the Romanian Parliament in the 2012-2016 legislature compared to those initiated in the 2016-2020 legislature, when the number of women parliamentarians increased by 8% compared to the previous legislature in which they represented only 11% of the total parliamentarians (MPs), in order to find out to what extent this increase in women's political participation influenced a better representation of women's specific interests relevant to increasing birth rate, such as childbirth and childcare, by bringing women's experiences to the agenda of theoretical debate and political decision.

The paper is based on content analysis of legislative proposals initiated in the two legislatures, following the link between the type of support measures proposed with impact on birth rate and the gender of their initiators, as well as the entire legislative process of the respective initiatives. The results show that the increased presence of women in the second analyzed legislature shifted the focus of birth rate stimulation policies from offering financial incentives, which discouraged active involvement of mothers in the labor market, to promoting measures that encourage work-family balance and allow parents to remain active in the labor market.

This paper consists of four sections. The first section presents the theoretical framework of the paper, explaining the connection between women's political representation and the type of measures proposed by politicians to support birth rate. The second section describes the data and methods used, and the third introduces the results of empirical analysis. The final section is dedicated to conclusions and recommendations for future studies.

Theoretical Framework

Most theoretical and empirical studies on women's political representation have their roots in Hanna Pitkin's fundamental work, *The Concept of Representation* (1967), which identified four distinct dimensions of representation: formalistic, descriptive, substantive, and symbolic, without establishing a correlation between them and without considering gender. If formalistic representation, which refers to the formal authority given to an individual to act on behalf of others, is problematic because all actions of representatives are considered representation, regardless of their quality, symbolic representation reflects a more generalized sense of representation, based on the attitudes and beliefs of those represented. Descriptive representation refers to how a representative stands for the represented by sharing similar characteristics, but Pitkin views this concept as limited because it focuses more on the composition of the political institution than on its actions. Substantive representation, defined as "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209), is considered the most important by the author, as it emphasizes what happens in the representation process.

Towards the end of the 20th century, with the development of gender studies, political representation was analyzed from a gender perspective (Phillips, 1995), descriptive representation being regarded as a prerequisite for substantive representation. There are various studies that have analyzed whether descriptive representation influences substantive representation, and their results have been equally varied. While some studies have established a clear correlation between the numerical presence of women and the representation of their specific interests (Taylor-Robinson and Heath, 2003; Celis, 2006; Wängnerud, 2009), others have not revealed significant differences between the activity of women and men MPs (Weldon, 2002; Childs and Krook, 2009), arguing that the influence of descriptive representation on substantive representation is more probabilistic than deterministic, meaning that a larger number of women in the legislature increases the chances of achieving substantive representation of women, but does not guarantee it (Dodson, 2006; Phillips, 1995). An argument in favor of women's representation by women, despite the fact that they are driven by very different priorities and goals, is not based on the idea that women are defenders of a group identity or that they explicitly define themselves by gender identity, but on

the fact that it is impossible to escape the social processes that associate us with our gender (Phillips, 1995). In this sense, the motive why democracies need more women in politics derives from the belief that political reasoning is formed based on life experiences and that, in a society organized by gender, these experiences determine different perspectives, priorities, or goals (Phillips, 2002; Mateo Diaz, 2005).

Empirical studies have outlined women's interests in three main categories. The first one associates women's interests with concerns from the private sphere, according to traditional views on gender relations. These stem from exclusively female experiences related to reproduction, while predominantly feminine experiences include care, single motherhood, widowhood, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, pornography, prostitution (Miroiu, 2004). Another type of women's experiences, this time shared with other marginalized categories, results from subordination and discrimination. Molyneux (1985, p. 233) described them as "practical" interests that "are given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labor". If discrimination manifests through lower access or lack of access to professional or political positions, to higher-paying occupations, to high-prestige positions, subordination manifests through placing women in lower-paid jobs or through double workdays (Miroiu, 2004). This feminist approach, which combines the private and public spheres, is based on recognizing women as a distinct social category, identifying power imbalances between men and women, and committing to promoting policies that increase women's autonomy (Wängnerud, 2000).

Recent empirical research has shown that, in developing countries, increased descriptive representation of women has led to better provision of public goods, especially in education and health, while in developed countries it has induced changes in parliamentary debates and the adoption of specific policies, such as improving the public childcare system (Hessami and Lopes da Fonseca, 2020). However, the success of substantive representation of women's specific interests depends not only on the number of women MPs but also on the ideology of political parties in parliament, the political balance of parties in that parliament, and the legislative seniority, women MPs with longer legislative experience having a security of their position that allows them to deviate from party

guidelines to support women's rights policies compared to more junior women MPs (Senk, 2023).

Perspectives on childcare vary depending on the political orientation of parties. Left-wing, social-democratic parties traditionally promote the benefits of a state childcare system, accessible at low costs for parents. In contrast, right-wing parties emphasize the right of parents to choose to stay home to care for their children, supporting childcare leaves that give mothers the opportunity to stay home with young children, and with the rise of right-wing populist parties, the traditional family has been reaffirmed as a major concern addressed to women (Kantola, 2006).

There is a vast literature on fertility in advanced societies, which have the option of birth control, trying to identify factors that influence the increase or decrease in fertility rates, ranging from economic trends and forms of employment or unemployment to social policies addressing the family, welfare regimes, changes in cultural values and attitudes, or new reproductive technologies.

Since family income plays an essential role in the intention to have children (Hanappi et al., 2017), periods of economic crisis create uncertainty, being associated with a decline in fertility through postponing pregnancy (Sobotka et al., 2010), especially in the case of the first child. Also, the intention to have a second child is lower in families with low income (Fiori, 2011). On the other hand, women with higher education levels and career-oriented tend not to have children more frequently in contexts where the childcare leave is less generous, or when part-time employment opportunities are limited, and men spend more hours in the labor market (Brini, 2020). However, part-time work, although it may facilitate the reconciliation between family life and remaining in the labor market, most often favors maintaining responsibilities related to childcare and household chores in women's charge.

Therefore, encouraging more egalitarian gender relations in private life, including paternal childcare leave, and the availability of affordable childcare services are the most important measures to reduce the double burden on women, without diminishing their involvement in any sphere of life, leading to reconciliation between professional and family life and, implicitly, to increased birth rates (Gomes et al., 2012), ensuring economic competitiveness by increasing the workforce and combating social exclusion and poverty (Esping-Andersen, 2002).

In the early years after the fall of communism in Romania, political parties, regardless of ideology, addressed the issue of declining birth rate through financial incentives, such as measures to increase child allowances, tax facilities based on the number of children in a family, or material support for families with many children, with liberal parties also proposing allowances for mothers and housewives who interrupted their activity to raise children, thus "encouraging the irreplaceable role of the mother through economic means" (Voicu, Voicu, 1999, p. 618). Additionally, an indirect measure found both in social-democratic and nationalist parties was the concern to solve the problem of "street children" by establishing shelters (Voicu, Voicu, 1999, p. 600, 651, 653).

The result of implementing these programs is highlighted by the analysis of childcare policies (Băluță, 2014), conducted before the increase in descriptive representation of women in the Romanian Parliament from 11% to 19% following the elections at the end of 2016, which revealed that they are built around a familialist perspective, emphasizing the mother's role in the early years of the child's life by encouraging extended childcare leaves of 1-2 years, mainly assumed by mothers.

Family policies in Romania before the increase in descriptive representation of women at the end of 2016 fall into two models of gender arrangement predominantly within a household, as defined by Pfau-Effinger (1998): the traditional model in which the man is the main breadwinner, while the woman does the care work, which applies to families with children under 3 years old, and the dual earner/state carer model, which applies to families with children over 3 years old (Cruşmac and Köhler, 2016).

The presence of women in the Romanian Parliament would be expected to determine the support of legislative initiatives oriented towards a family model that leads to the reconciliation of women's professional life with family life.

The main hypotheses followed in this study are:

H1: Greater descriptive representation of women in the Romanian Parliament leads to greater substantive representation of their specific interests regarding birth rate and childcare.

H2: Lower presence of women in the Romanian Parliament leads to measures regarding birth rate and childcare that reinforce the family model in which the man is the main breadwinner.

H3: Greater presence of women in the Romanian Parliament leads to substantive representation of their specific interests regarding birth rate and childcare oriented towards reconciling women's family life with professional life.

Data and Methods

The method used in this research to test, in a first stage, the 3 hypotheses is content analysis of the 3978 legislative initiatives registered by MPs in the 2012-2016 and 2016-2020 legislatures, available on the Senate and Chamber of Deputies websites.

The number of women MPs in our country has stabilized around 10-11% since 2000, when there was an increase in descriptive representation of women in Parliament due to preparations for joining the European Union. However, following the parliamentary elections in 2016, there was a significant increase, with descriptive representation of women reaching 19% of the total MPs. Therefore, we considered it appropriate to analyze the legislative initiatives registered in the 2012-2016 legislature in relation to those registered in the 2016-2020 legislature.

According to Krippendorff's (2004, p. 1) definition, content analysis is "an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent". Based on direct observations and concrete data, content analysis classifies existing information, aiming to discover patterns, themes, or correlations in the data, the ultimate goal being to anticipate trends, behaviors, or effects of the analyzed content. In legislative research, content analysis has been used to examine the characteristics of the legislature regarding party ideology, government positioning, parliamentary voting, constituency-based representation, policy agenda, quality of debate, or the role of the media in reporting MPs' statements based on ideological positions (Slapin and Proksch, 2014).

In this case study, content analysis is used to classify the representative sample of 3978 legislative initiatives registered by MPs between December 2012 and December 2020 to identify the sub-sample that is the main subject of the analysis of legislative initiatives that provided direct and

indirect measures to increase birth rate and the correlations that exist between the typology of supported initiatives and the gender of the initiators and their political affiliation.

Direct measures were considered family planning policies and access to medical services for pregnant women, financial incentives to have children, such as childcare leave, state child allowance, tax facilities for families with children, proposals to amend labor legislation by provisions that reduce the contribution period for women who have had multiple children or lifetime pensions for housewives with multiple children, state financial support for assisted reproductive techniques, proposals to increase childcare infrastructure in nurseries and kindergartens, or alternative childcare proposals in the absence of nurseries and kindergartens.

Given that Romania ranks first in the European Union in the number of minor mothers, aged up to 15 years, in the period 2012-2021 for which data is available on the Eurostat website (2023), we also included legislative proposals that support the introduction of health education in schools to prevent the increase in the number of minor mothers.

Indirect measures included legislative proposals for financial support for raising and caring for children in low-income families, proposals to facilitate adoption or family placement, as well as other facilities for children to support the family by reducing monthly expenses or supporting children with disabilities, measures that could influence the intention to have another child.

For the statistical analysis of legislative initiatives, we used the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program. Depending on the type of legislative initiative, they were coded as proposals to amend already adopted laws and standalone legislative proposals. For the gender of the initiators, we used three variables: female, male, and mixed group (female-male). We considered the year of initiation of each legislative proposal so that a quantitative comparison could be made between the two legislatures, 2012-2016 and 2016-2020, and the year of the vote to correlate the duration of the legislative process with the stage of the legislative proposal at the time of this analysis, as well as the political affiliation of the government at the time of initiation and at the time of the decisive vote for the legislative proposal. The stage of legislative proposals was coded by four variables: rejected, adopted, unfinished

legislative process, and withdrawn. The variables used for legislative initiatives that proposed direct measures were "Financial incentives", "Child allowance", "Childcare leave", "Childcare infrastructure", "Assisted reproduction", "Free medical services for pregnancy", "Hot meal and after-school", "Health education", "Others". For legislative initiatives that proposed indirect measures, we used the variables "Allowance for the child with disability", "Services for the child with disability", "Day off for parents", "Facilitation of adoption", "Financial incentives to reduce education expenses", "Facilities to ensure livelihood", "Others".

A limitation in the operationalization of legislative initiatives is due to the fact that both on the Senate website and on the Chamber of Deputies website, in the electronic box of each legislative proposal, no distinction is made between the main initiator and the MPs who support the project by signature, the initiator being identified by accessing the registration address at the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate for debate or the statement of reasons which, usually, but without certainty, are signed only by the MPs who are the authors of the legislative initiative. Thus, legislative initiatives could be classified more accurately and analyzed from the perspective of the gender of the initiators and their political affiliation.

The analysis of this paper will focus more on legislative initiatives that propose direct measures to increase birth rate.

To test the correlation between the descriptive representation of women in the Romanian Parliament and the substantive representation of their interests regarding the reconciliation of family life and professional life, moderated by political parties, and to estimate the probability that the presence of women will influence the process-focused substantive representation by increasing the number of legislative initiatives or the outcome-focused substantive representation by adopting legislative proposals favorable to women, in the second stage of the analysis I used binary logistic regression models.

The dependent variables included in the logistic regression models are legislative initiatives that provide direct measures, legislative initiatives that provide direct measures to grant financial incentives, legislative initiatives that support direct measures for childcare infrastructure, and adopted legislative initiatives. The predictors used to determine the probability that MPs initiated these legislative proposals were the gender of the initiators,

their political affiliation, the political affiliation of the government at the time of initiation, and the legislature. The same predictors, to which I added the independent variable time which considers the influence of the legislative process duration on the adoption of the initiatives, were used to find out the probability that a legislative initiative will be adopted.

Due to the small number of adopted legislative initiatives regarding the granting of financial incentives and childcare infrastructure, it was not possible to determine the predictability of adopting these initiatives based on the gender of the initiators and political affiliation. Also, the different gender distribution within the political parties that are part of the legislatures, as well as the low percentage of women MPs represent another limitation in the use of logistic regression, gender being an insignificant predictor for process-focused substantive representation through the initiation of legislative proposals regarding the reconciliation of family life with the professional life of women. A descriptive representation of women parliamentarians that exceeds the critical mass of 30% of the total MPs could make the gender variable a significant predictor for the initiation of legislative proposals.

Results and discussion

Content analysis of legislative initiatives regarding the increase of birth rate

Following the application of the classification criteria of legislative initiatives aimed at direct and indirect measures to increase birth rate on the representative sample of 3978 legislative proposals from the two legislatures, 2012-2016 and 2016-2020, a sub-sample of 162 legislative initiatives resulted, representing a percentage of 4.07% of the total registered by MPs.

As can be seen in the graph below (Graph 1), most initiatives, 102, were submitted in the first legislature, when women represented only 11% of the members of the Romanian Parliament, and especially in the first year, 2013, as a continuation of the policies to stimulate birth rate started in 2011-2012 by granting an allowance of 85% of the salary for the last 12 months to parents active in the labor market.

**Graph 1. Legislative initiatives to increase birth rate
in the 2012-2016 and 2016-2020 legislatures**
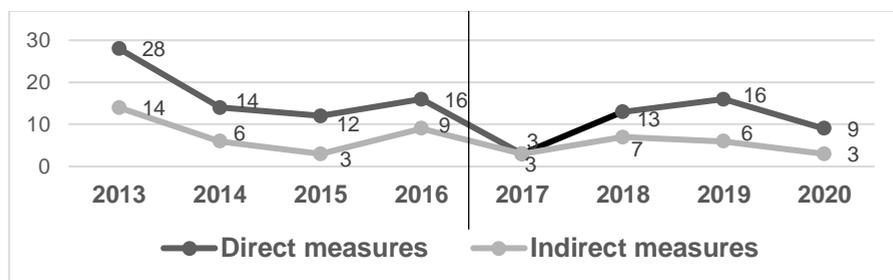
Source: Romanian Parliament.

The fewest legislative initiatives were registered in 2017, the first year in which the descriptive representation of women parliamentarians increased by 8% compared to the previous legislature.

In the first legislature, 70 legislative initiatives aimed at direct measures and 32 legislative initiatives regarding indirect measures to increase birth rate were initiated, and in the second legislature 41, respectively 19.

Only 29.01% of the total legislative proposals initiated are standalone proposals, the others being proposals to amend existing laws.

The distribution of legislative initiatives according to the gender of the initiators can be observed in the tables below (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Legislative initiatives that provide direct measures

	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total %	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total %
Women	11	1	5	0	**24**	1	3	5	3	**29**
Mixed group	3	2	1	1	**10**	0	1	2	1	**10**
Men	14	11	6	15	**66**	2	9	9	5	**61**

Source: Romanian Parliament.

Table 2. Legislative initiatives that provide indirect measures

	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total %	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total %
Women	4	1	0	2	**22**	1	3	1	0	**26**
Mixed group	2	1	0	0	**9**	2	0	0	0	**11**
Men	8	4	3	7	**69**	0	4	5	3	**63**

Source: Romanian Parliament.

Although the percentage of legislative proposals initiated by men MPs regarding both categories of measures is majority in both the first and second legislatures, we find that the percentage of legislative proposals initiated by women MPs is increasing in the second legislature, while the percentage of legislative proposals initiated by men MPs is decreasing. If we relate the percentage of legislative initiatives to the percentage of descriptive representation of women and men MPs, we find that although men were 8.07 times more numerous in the first legislature, they initiated only 2.75 times more legislative proposals that provide direct measures and only 3.13 times more legislative proposals that provide indirect measures than women, and in the second legislature, when they were 4.26 times more numerous, they initiated only 2.1 times, respectively 2.42 times more legislative proposals regarding the increase of birth rate.

28 of the 162 legislative proposals became law, 7 during the first legislature analyzed, 19 in the second and 2 in the 2020-2024 legislature.

5 of the legislative proposals registered in 2013 were adopted in 2014. 1 of the legislative proposals registered in 2014 became law in 2016. 2 of those registered in 2015 became law, 1 in 2016 and 1 in 2017. 1 of the legislative proposals registered in 2016 was adopted in 2017.

2 of the legislative proposals registered in 2017 became law, 1 in 2018 and the other four years later, in 2021. 7 of the legislative proposals registered in 2018 became law, 2 in the same year, 2 in 2019, 2 in 2020 and 1 in 2022. 7 of those initiated in 2019 reached the vote in the Chamber of Deputies in 2020 and were adopted, and 3 of those registered in 2020 became law in the same year.

In the last year analyzed, 2020, the smaller number of legislative proposals registered compared to 2018 and 2019 can be explained by the large number of legislative proposals that reached debate and were subjected to the decisive vote in the Chamber of Deputies, 12 of the total of 20 legislative proposals that became laws in the 2016-2020 legislature ending their legislative process this year.

The duration of the legislative process is generally one year in both legislatures, but, unlike the first legislature, 5 of the legislative proposals registered in the second legislature became laws in the same year.

The distribution of the number of legislative proposals registered each year from 2012-2016 and 2016-2020 legislatures, that became laws, is shown in Table 3 according to the gender of the MPs initiators.

Table 3. Number of legislative proposals that became law, according to the gender of the MPs initiators

	Year of initiation					Year of initiation				
	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Women MPs	4				**4**		3	2		5
Mixed group	1				1	1	1	2		4
Men MPs		1	2	1	**4**	1	3	3	3	**10**

Source: Romanian Parliament.

Even though women MPs in the first legislature represented only 11% of the total MPs, 4 of the legislative proposals initiated by them were adopted, equally with those initiated by men MPs and became laws. And in the next legislature, 2016-2020, when they represented 19% of the total MPs, 5 of the legislative proposals initiated by women MPs were adopted, also noting an increase in the adoption of legislative proposals that were initiated together with men MPs.

4 of the total legislative proposals initiated in the first legislature have not yet completed their legislative process. 9 were withdrawn by the initiating MPs based on Art. 63 (5) of the Romanian Constitution, at the end of the mandate, and all the others 82, except for the 7 that became law, were rejected. In the 2016-2020 legislature, 60 legislative proposals aimed at direct or indirect measures to increase birth rate were registered, 20 of which have not completed their legislative process, 9 were withdrawn at the end of the legislature, and 11 were rejected.

Among the most frequent arguments for rejecting legislative proposals, if the reasons underlying the rejection report are specified in the documents from the electronic box of the legislative proposal, are the lack of mention of the budgetary impact in the statement of reasons or the lack of correlation with the Fiscal-Budgetary Responsibility Law no. 69/2010, more precisely the lack of the financial sheet accompanied by the declaration that the increase in expenditure is compatible with the objectives and strategic priorities specified in the fiscal-budgetary strategy,

with the annual budget law and with the expenditure ceilings presented in the fiscal-budgetary strategy.

The content analysis of legislative proposals for direct measures to increase birth rate revealed that in the first legislature, 2012-2016, MPs gave more importance to proposals for granting incentives, increasing the state child allowance and modifying the childcare leave allowance, initiating fewer legislative proposals to improve the childcare infrastructure that could allow mothers to return to work more quickly and easily.

For clearer visualization, I illustrated in the graph below the legislative initiatives according to the categories of direct measures submitted in the two legislatures.

Graph 2. The share of legislative proposals for direct measures initiated in the 2012-2016 and 2016-2020 legislatures
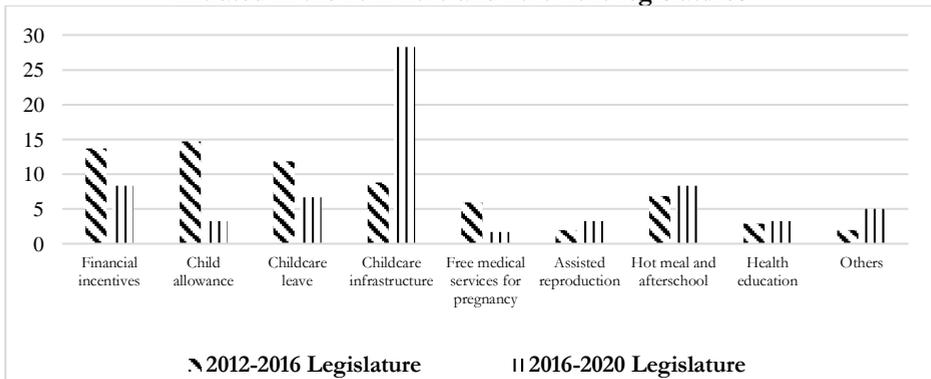
Source: Romanian Parliament.

4 of the legislative proposals that provide incentives support the reduction of the pension contribution period. It is noteworthy that these proposals are initiated only by a man MP or by a group of men MPs, not by women MPs. The reduction period varies from one year to three years and from one child to at least three. One of the 4 legislative proposals was initiated as a measure to correct the injustice done to women in Romania who gave birth to three or more children before 1990, when there were no contraceptive methods or the legal possibility of having an abortion. Another proposal supports the reduction of the pension contribution period by three years only for mothers who gave birth to and raised at least one child with a disability until the age of 10.

Other types of incentives proposed through 3 legislative proposals initiated by a man MP, or a group of men MPs include the reduction or exemption of income tax for each child born and raised in the family. The lifetime annuity or allowance for heroic mothers who gave birth to and raised at least three children were each supported by a man MP. Also, the large family bonus of 15,000 lei at the birth of the third child and the large family allowance of 50% of the gross minimum wage were proposed by a man MP within the initiative entitled "Legislative proposal for the consolidation of the state through the support of demographic growth", which was subsequently withdrawn.

Noteworthy is another standalone legislative proposal, unlike most legislative initiatives which are, in fact, proposals to amend existing laws, entitled "Legislative proposal to support the increase of birth rate" and initiated by a group of women and men MPs from three political formations, the Conservative Party, the People's Party - Dan Diaconescu and the Liberal Democratic Party. It addresses, as argued in the statement of reasons, active families with low and middle incomes, supporting the exemption from paying income tax, but also the exemption from paying tax for a single property and subsidizing the interest for a single mortgage loan of up to 50,000 euros, the purchase of a house being considered a measure to encourage birth rate and support the family. Instead, this legislative proposal does not refer to childcare services for the first years of the child's life so that mothers do not have to be absent from the labor market for a long time and can benefit from the income tax exemption provided.

Regarding the improvement of childcare services infrastructure, 4 legislative initiatives were proposed regarding the establishment, operation and organization of nurseries, of which 1 was initiated by a woman MP to establish the age range in which children can benefit from the services of these public or private institutions between a minimum of three months and a maximum of three years. This proposal became law. The other 3 legislative proposals were initiated by a man MP, one of them supporting, given the insufficient number of nurseries, the priority acceptance of enrollment applications for children between 0 and 2 years old whose mothers return to work before the end of childcare leave, except for social cases. Unlike these, the other 2 provide for the establishment of new nurseries, one being a standalone legislative proposal called "Legislative proposal for the approval of the National Program 'Nurseries for the

children of Romania"'. This established the total number of nurseries based on the number of inhabitants, from one nursery for 10,000-15,000 inhabitants to 11 nurseries for over 360,000 inhabitants and provided a maximum implementation period of 4 years. None of these 3 legislative proposals were adopted.

Other legislative initiatives regarding direct measures to improve childcare infrastructure provide for the regulation of the profession of nanny – legislative proposal initiated by a woman MP and adopted –, granting a service voucher intended for the payment of domestic services at home and nannies, in the absence of available nurseries – legislative proposal initiated by a man MP and rejected by the decision-making Chamber –, allowance for grandparents who take care of children in the situation where parents return to work before the age of 2, respectively 3 years – legislative proposal initiated by a mixed group of conservative MPs and rejected by both Chambers –, and vouchers for the payment of afterschool services – legislative proposal initiated by a group of liberal women, which has not yet completed its legislative process.

Free medical services for pregnant women and health education to reduce the number of teenage mothers were submitted by the same man MP almost every year of the mandate, being each time rejected.

The reimbursement of medically assisted human reproduction procedures and medical services for in vitro fertilization and embryo transfer were initiated by a man MP, respectively by a woman MP, none of these proposals being adopted.

The 2 legislative proposals included in the category of other direct measures were initiated by a woman MP. The proposal registered in 2015 by an independent woman MP establishes a series of obligations and sanctions for non-compliance by specialized medical personnel or parents in order to reduce infant mortality. Unlike this, the legislative proposal registered by a conservative woman MP supports the pardon of pregnant women and women who are raising children under the age of 5, a provision that could influence the intention of women who are under the threat of being imprisoned for various criminal or corruption acts, to have a child or another child.

In the second legislature that is the subject of this study, 2016-2020, when the number of women in Parliament reached 19%, there is a reversal of

the initiatives submitted by MPs, the emphasis being placed, this time, on childcare infrastructure and less on financial or fiscal incentives, on increasing the state child allowance or on the childcare leave allowance.

Among the legislative proposals to expand childcare infrastructure are a proposal initiated by a man MP that regulates the sources of funding for nurseries, which became law, another legislative proposal submitted by a group of men MPs that provides tax incentives for employers who establish nurseries for the children of employees, also became law, as well as a legislative proposal registered by a man MP that has not yet completed its legislative process and which supports the exemption of companies with at least 30 employees from paying profit tax annually if the money is used for the construction and/or maintenance of nurseries or kindergartens for the children of their employees.

"The legislative proposal for the care and early education of children from active families", initiated by a woman MP and sent to the Chamber of Deputies for debate, provides for the organization of services for the care and early education of the children of their own employees in public institutions in Romania, partially or fully funded from the state budget, as well as in enterprises with majority or full state capital as a solution of the Romanian state to respond to the problem of declining birth rate.

Another solution proposed by a man MP was that, in the absence of nurseries, the age at which children can be admitted to the preschool system should be reduced to a minimum of 2 years. This legislative proposal became law.

Regarding the increase in extended family involvement, two legislative proposals have been initiated: one by a woman MP that stipulates that the childcare leave allowance be granted using the same calculation method to grandparents who are employed and decide to care for their grandchildren until the age of 2 or 3 years, respectively. The proposal initiated by a group of men MPs introduces a childcare allowance for grandparents, the monthly amount of which is equal to the insertion incentive during the period the insertion incentive is granted to the mother. Both legislative proposals have been sent to the Chamber of Deputies for debate.

For the acquisition of childcare and assistance services, the legislative proposal initiated by a man MP in 2019 provides a voucher worth 150 euros per month for each child up to 3 years old. This proposal has

been sent to the Chamber of Deputies for debate. In contrast, the legislative proposal initiated by another man MP also in 2019, for granting vouchers to parents who need childcare, and assistance services based on the income level per family member, has become law.

Another legislative proposal registered in 2018 by a group of men MPs supports, among other things, the granting of coupons for early education services, funding for hot meal programs and afterschool programs, funding for boarding schools, regulation of the nanny profession, and its inclusion in the auxiliary teaching staff. This proposal is currently being worked on at the permanent committees of the Senate.

The regulation of the nanny profession proposed by a woman MP in 2018 was rejected by both Chambers.

Another solution proposed by a man MP for childcare in the first 2 years of life was that mothers on childcare leave could take care of another child with the payment of a minimum wage. This legislative proposal has not yet completed its course.

To support parents active in the labor market, a woman MP proposed in 2019, before the pandemic, that employees with children up to 10 years old be granted days off when classes are suspended. The legislative proposal has been sent to the Chamber for debate. In the same year, another legislative proposal initiated by a mixed group of MPs, regarding the granting of days off to parents for child supervision in the event of temporary closure of educational institutions, became law. In contrast, the "Legislative proposal to support parents and private economic operators during the state of alert and suspension of classes", supported by a mixed group of MPs in June 2020, after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, is still in the legislative circuit.

The initiatives regarding direct measures included in "Others" classification criterion are part of a package of legislative proposals regarding breastfeeding, registered by the same man MP. The first such proposal, which targets sanctions for individuals who do not allow breastfeeding in any public space, an approach considered abuse and discrimination that would socially and professionally isolate mothers, has become law. The same package includes the "Legislative proposal for the classification of maternity hospitals as Child-Friendly Hospitals, to promote and support breastfeeding and reduce infant mortality and

morbidity", the "Legislative proposal for the establishment of the National Breastfeeding Commission", and the "Legislative proposal for the establishment of Breast Milk Banks", which, however, were rejected by the decision-making Chamber.

The legislative initiative regarding health education in schools was also adopted in 2020 through the legislative proposal initiated in 2018 by a mixed group of women and men, which establishes the obligation of specialized bodies of central public administration, local public administration authorities, as well as any other public or private institutions with responsibilities in the field of health or education to take, under the law, all necessary measures for the systematic implementation in school units, at least once per semester, of life education programs, including sexual education for children, to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancies.

Regression analysis of legislative initiatives on increasing birth rate

Based on the political affiliation of the initiators, the parties that recorded the most legislative proposals were the Social Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party, as shown in the table below.

**Table 4. Distribution of initiators by political affiliation
in both legislatures (%)**

Social Democratic Party (SDP)	30.2
National Liberal Party (NLP)	29.6
People's Party - Dan Diaconescu (PPDD)	13.0
Independent Parliamentarians	10.5
Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (DUHR)	8.6
Democratic Liberal Party (DLP)	5.6
Save Romania Union (SRU)	4.9
Conservative Party (CP)	3.7
National Union for the Progress of Romania (NUPR)	3.7
People's Movement Party (PMP)	2.5
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE)	1.9
Pro Romania	0.6
Liberal Conservative Group	0.6
Minorities	0.6

Source: Romanian Parliament.

For the logistic regressions used in the second stage of the analysis of the correlation between descriptive representation and substantive representation of legislative initiatives on increasing birth rates, the two political parties that initiated the most legislative proposals, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Liberal Party (NLP), and the Save Romania Union (SRU), a party founded from civil society, which, although it entered Parliament in the second legislature analyzed in this study, is the third party in terms of the number of women MPs, were considered.

Given the increased descriptive representation of women in the 2016-2020 legislature, it is expected that their increased presence will lead to better substantive representation of women's interests regarding increasing birth rate, on the one hand oriented towards the process by increasing the number of legislative proposals initiated compared to the previous legislature, on the other hand oriented towards outcome by increasing the number of legislative proposals adopted. At the same time, the increased presence of women in the second legislature should lead to the initiation and adoption of more legislative proposals that favor the reconciliation of family life with women's professional life by expanding childcare services infrastructure.

To verify whether better process-focused substantive representation occurred in the second legislature, we analyzed the effect of gender, political affiliation, and time variables on legislative initiatives that provide direct measures to increase birth rate.

Regarding the total number of legislative proposals that provide direct measures initiated, we did not identify statistically significant effects of the independent variables. Instead, the probability that legislative proposals regarding direct childcare infrastructure measures will be initiated in the second legislature is higher.

Table 5a. Dependent Variable - Legislative initiatives proposed for childcare infrastructure

Step 1a	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
SDP	-0.171	0.603	0.081	1	0.777	0.843
NLP	1.109	0.508	4.762	1	**0.029**	3.031
SRU	-0.376	1.159	0.105	1	0.746	0.687

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
male	0.104	0.507	0.042	1	0.837	1.110
guv1	-0.422	0.711	0.352	1	0.553	0.656
guv7	1.373	0.509	7.274	1	**0.007**	3.948
Constant	-2.484	0.615	16.31	1	0	0.083

In this binary logistic regression model, affiliation with NLP and initiation during the SDP-ALDE Government (guv7) led by Prime Minister Viorica Dăncilă are the independent variables that significantly influence the dependent variable. The affiliation of initiators MPs with NLP, a party in opposition in the first 3 years of the 2016-2020 legislature, increases the chance of initiating a legislative proposal regarding childcare infrastructure by 3 times, and the SDP-ALDE Government at the time of initiation increases the probability of such a legislative proposal being initiated by 4 times. The other independent variables, the gender of the initiators, affiliation with SDP or SRU, and guv1 - the SLU Government (SDP-NLP-CP-NUPR) led by Prime Minister Victor Ponta, are not significant.

Replacing the two governments with the variable legislature, we will find that the probability of these initiatives being initiated in the second legislature, which coincides mostly with the SDP-ALDE Government, remains.

Table 5b. Dependent Variable - Legislative initiatives proposed for childcare infrastructure

Step 1a	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
male	0.281	0.498	0.318	1	0.573	1.324
SDP	-0.239	0.588	0.165	1	0.685	0.788
NLP	1.104	0.501	4.860	1	**0.027**	3.016
SRU	-0.567	1.155	0.241	1	0.624	0.567
legislature	1.253	0.483	6.739	1	**0.009**	3.502
Constant	-4.047	0.891	20.653	1	0	0.017

Political affiliation with NLP increases the probability that legislative proposals regarding childcare infrastructure will be initiated by MPs of this party by 3 times, and their initiation occurs with a probability of 3.5 times higher in the second legislature.

In comparison, legislative proposals that encourage the traditional family model, by providing financial incentives for increasing birth rate, were initiated mainly in the first legislature.

For the initiation of legislative proposals that support financial incentives, the only significant predictor is the legislature, these being initiated more in the first legislature. Gender and political affiliation do not influence the probability of proposing this type of legislative initiative.

Table 6. Dependent Variable - Legislative initiatives proposed for providing financial incentives

Step 1a	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
male	-0.049	0.367	0.018	1	0.894	0.952
SDP	-0.128	0.390	0.108	1	0.742	0.880
NLP	-0.156	0.413	0.143	1	0.706	0.856
SRU	-0.553	1.141	0.234	1	0.628	0.575
legislature	-1.002	0.419	5.725	1	**0.017**	0.367
Constant	0.709	0.609	1.356	1	0.244	2.033

To determine the factors that could influence the adoption of legislative initiatives regarding direct measures to increase birth rate, we analyzed the effects of the independent variables of gender, political affiliation, and the duration of the legislative process, from initiation to the moment of voting in the decision-making Chamber.

Table 7a. Dependent Variable - Legislative initiatives providing direct measures adopted

Step 1a	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
male	-0.673	0.698	0.931	1	0.335	0.510
SDP	1.408	0.79	3.179	1	0.075	4.088
NLP	1.802	0.772	5.443	1	**0.020**	6.061
SRU	1.498	1.421	1.111	1	0.292	4.472
time	-0.752	0.315	5.712	1	**0.017**	0.471
Constant	-0.941	0.788	1.426	1	0.232	0.39

In this logistic regression model, the effect of gender is not significant, but it suggests that being male could reduce the probability of initiating a legislative proposal regarding direct measures to increase birth rate that

will be adopted by 49%. Political affiliation with SRU is not significant, although it could increase the chance of adopting a legislative proposal providing direct measures initiated by SRU MPs by 4.47 times, which can also be explained by the existence of this political formation in Parliament only in the second legislature analyzed. Affiliation with SDP is almost significant, increasing the chances of adoption by 4.08 times. Significant is the affiliation with NLP, which has a probability of 6.06 times higher. Instead, time, also significant, reduces the chances of a proposal being adopted as the duration of the legislative process increases.

After eliminating the variable gender from the logistic regression model, time remains significant. For each additional unit of time, the chance of a legislative proposal being adopted decreases by 52.4%.

Table 7b. Dependent Variable - Legislative initiatives providing direct measures adopted

Step 1a	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
SDP	1.483	0.778	3.628	1	0.057	4.404
NLP	1.802	0.764	5.567	1	**0.018**	6.063
SRU	1.893	1.379	1.885	1	0.170	6.639
time	-0.742	0.311	5.68	1	**0.017**	0.476
Constant	-1.392	0.653	4.539	1	0.033	0.249

Although affiliation with SRU is not significant, Exp(B) suggests a large increase in the chances of adopting a legislative proposal (by 6.63 times) initiated by MPs from this party. Affiliation with SDP becomes more significant, potentially increasing the chances of adoption by 4.4 times, this difference probably due to the structure of the parliamentary group which has more women compared to other parties, in this case, the effects of gender and political affiliation variables overlapping. Affiliation with NLP is significant, increasing the chances of adopting legislative initiatives providing direct measures to increase birth rate by 6.6 times, indicating a strong influence of this independent variable.

To verify whether the increased presence of women influenced outcome-focused substantive representation, by adopting more legislative proposals, we controlled for the effect of gender and legislature on the

adoption of legislative initiatives providing both direct and indirect measures to increase birth rate.

Table 8. Dependent Variable – Total legislative initiatives adopted

Step 1a	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
male	-0.733	0.441	2.761	1	0.097	0.480
legislature	1.558	0.450	11.983	1	**0.001**	4.752
Constant	-3.456	0.787	19.283	1	0	0.032

According to this binary logistic regression model, it is more likely that legislative initiatives regarding increasing birth rate proposed by women will be adopted, and adoption will take place in the second legislature when the descriptive representation of women in the Romanian Parliament was higher.

After controlling for the effect of political affiliation, the effect of the gender variable diminishes due to the differences in the gender composition of the parliamentary groups of the political parties that make up the Romanian Parliament.

Conclusions

The increased awareness of declining birth rate, population aging, and massive migration after Romania's accession to the European Union led to the initiation of a series of legislative proposals in the two legislatures, 2012-2016 and 2016-2020.

Given the disproportionate percentage of women and men in Parliament, 11% women and 89% men in the 2012-2016 legislature, and 19% women and 81% men in the 2016-2020 legislature, we cannot claim that the number of legislative proposals for increasing birth rate initiated by women MPs should be higher or equal to that of proposals initiated by men MPs, although the quantitative analysis revealed similarities in many of the categories of proposals pursued. Although gender does not have a statistically significant effect in the case of initiation, even when the effects of political affiliation are eliminated, we find that the increased presence

of women in the second legislature led to the adoption of more legislative proposals.

Thus, we can conclude that the first hypothesis, H1: Greater descriptive representation of women in the Romanian Parliament leads to greater substantive representation of their specific interests regarding birth rate and childcare, is partially confirmed, through a greater substantive representation oriented towards outcome, but not towards the process.

As emerged from the content analysis of the legislative proposals initiated in the two legislatures, in the 2016-2020 legislature, in which the descriptive representation of women almost doubled, there was a reversal of the type of direct measures proposed, from financial incentives or reduction of the contribution period to the pension, increasing the state child allowance, the childcare leave allowance for a period of 2 years, measures that delay the return of mothers to the labor market, to measures to expand external childcare services.

Even if the logistic regression models used in the analysis of legislative proposals that can support the reconciliation of family and professional life of women revealed that the effect of gender is not significant for their initiation, but rather the political affiliation with NLP, an opposition party, and initiation during the second legislature, in which the presence of women parliamentarians was increased, in conjunction with the mandate of the SDP-ALDE Government led by a woman, are significant predictors for their adoption.

Therefore, we cannot exclude the influence of gender on the confirmation of the other two hypotheses, H2: Lower presence of women in the Romanian Parliament leads to measures regarding birth rate and childcare that reinforce the family model in which the man is the main breadwinner, and H3: Greater presence of women in the Romanian Parliament leads to substantive representation of their specific interests regarding birth rate and childcare oriented towards reconciling women's family life with professional life.

The results of this study reveal the existence of a link between substantive and descriptive representation of women, in terms of the type of measures proposed through legislative initiatives to increase birth rate, but only a limited number of these initiatives have materialized into laws adopted by

Parliament. Further studies should analyze, using complementary research methods, what factors hindered the adoption of these initiatives and how the transformation of initiatives that promote women's interests into laws can be facilitated in the future.

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CONNECTEDNESS TO NATURE AND SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES IN ECUADORIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: This study examines the relationship between the Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS) and traditional sociodemographic variables—age, sex, place of residence, and socioeconomic status (SES)—among university students, with a focus on the contextual influence of a female-majority academic environment. Utilizing a cross-sectional design, data were collected from 396 psychology students (66% female, 34% male) who were selected via stratified probabilistic sampling. The normality tests (Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov) indicated non-parametric distributions for the CNS, necessitating the implementation of Spearman's correlation, Kruskal-Wallis, and Mann-Whitney U tests. The findings indicated an absence of a statistically significant association between CNS and SES ($\varrho = -0.023$, $p = 0.652$) or age ($\varrho = 0.041$, $p = 0.415$). Additionally, no significant differences were observed in CNS across urban/rural residency ($U = 19878.5$, $p = 0.710$) or sex ($U = 16244.5$, $p = 0.271$), with negligible effect sizes ($r < 0.07$). A Kruskal-Wallis analysis confirmed homogeneity in CNS across SES categories ($H(3) = 2.61$, $p = 0.456$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.007$). These findings challenge conventional models linking sociodemographic disparities to environmental perceptions, suggesting that institutional factors in homogeneous academic settings—such as equitable access to green spaces and gender-balanced socialization—may neutralize structural inequalities. The study underscores the potential of academic institutions to function as egalitarian spaces that foster nature connectedness, irrespective of students' backgrounds. Future research should explore psychosocial mediators (e.g., environmental identity) and replicate findings in diverse academic contexts to generalize these insights.

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Introduction

In the context of educational communities, environmental sustainability is a critical component in facilitating the transition towards more sustainable societies. Higher education institutions are responsible for training the future leaders of society and are also key actors in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021). Education for sustainability (EfS) is a multifaceted concept that aims to transform institutional culture by integrating sustainable principles into various facets of institutional life, including teaching, research, and campus operations. This holistic approach, which encompasses both academic and administrative activities, is a key component of EfS (Warwick, 2016).

University students occupy a pivotal role as agents of change, promoting sustainability within their institutions and in the communities with which they are affiliated. They frequently spearhead sustainability initiatives on campuses, serving as catalysts, facilitators, and ambassadors for these causes (Mohamad et al., 2021). For instance, the University of Wyoming offers an illustrative example of students' role as agents of change, forging informal university-community partnerships and propelling sustainability initiatives even in the absence of formal institutional frameworks (Budowle et al., 2021). These experiences underscore the transformative potential of student participation and underscore the need to strengthen their involvement in sustainable strategies on a global scale.

A body of research has identified a psychological dimension conducive to the promotion of pro-environmental behaviors: a sense of connectedness with nature. This concept encompasses a person's emotional and cognitive relationship with the natural environment. Several studies have demonstrated that it functions as a significant predictor of these behaviors (Anderson & Krettenauer, 2021; Geng et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2020; Whitburn et al., 2019). Beyond deliberate behaviors, the connection to nature has also been demonstrated to influence spontaneous responses, suggesting that both explicit and implicit relationships with the natural environment are critical in promoting sustainable actions (Geng et al.,

2015). In addition, research has identified this connection as a mediator between exposure to nature and pro-environmental behaviors. This finding suggests that physical contact with the environment may be insufficient without an underlying psychological link (Rosa et al., 2018; Whitburn et al., 2019).

Furthermore, a connection with nature has been demonstrated to be associated with eudaimonic well-being, as evidenced by an increased sense of purpose and personal fulfillment among individuals who experience a profound bond with their natural environment (Ibáñez-Rueda et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2020). This emotional bond is often strengthened through direct experiences with nature from an early age, which increases the likelihood of sustainable behaviors in adulthood (Rosa et al., 2018). Consequently, from educational and community perspectives, the promotion of connectivity with nature has the potential to increase the adoption of pro-environmental practices and to improve personal and collective well-being, thereby establishing a bridge to global sustainability.

Sociodemographic factors have been demonstrated to exert a substantial influence on the human-nature connection, thereby affecting how individuals perceive and interact with their natural surroundings. Research conducted in the European Union underscores the considerable impact of gender and economic prosperity on this connection, demonstrating that women and individuals with greater economic stability tend to report higher levels of connection with nature (Mikusiński et al., 2023). Similarly, age has been identified as a salient factor. Research conducted in both rural and urban contexts in Michigan indicates that older individuals, due to their greater experience and time interacting with the environment, exhibit a stronger relationship with nature (Fleck et al., 2021).

The geographical location of residence has been demonstrated to exert an influence on this association. Individuals residing in rural areas, due to their increased exposure to the natural environment, exhibit a stronger emotional and cognitive bond with nature (Fleck et al., 2021; Macias-Zambrano et al., 2024a). Finally, socioeconomic factors emerge as pivotal determinants. Individuals with lower economic status exhibit heightened environmental concerns, while those with greater economic resources tend to engage in more sustainable consumption behaviors. This suggests that material conditions influence both the perception of environmental problems and pro-environmental actions (Kirsten & Eligius Biyase, 2023).

The concept of environmental connectivity has been demonstrated to be associated with positive mental and psychological outcomes, particularly in urban contexts where access to natural environments is restricted. Research findings indicate that college students with stronger connections to nature exhibit reduced levels of stress and depression, along with higher levels of life satisfaction (Chytrý et al., 2022; Schönbach et al., 2022). However, this association is not uniform and is mediated by socioeconomic status (SES). Students from higher SES contexts tend to enjoy privileged access to green spaces and resources that allow them to participate in outdoor activities, such as sports and excursions, which strengthens their relationship with nature. Conversely, individuals from lower SES backgrounds encounter obstacles such as restricted access to quality natural areas, financial limitations, and the obligation to prioritize occupational or familial commitments, which curtails their prospects for engagement with the natural environment (Tomaszewski et al., 2022, 2024).

These inequalities underscore the necessity of implementing institutional strategies, such as the creation of green spaces on campuses, the development of programs that encourage outdoor activities, and the formulation of policies that minimize economic barriers. These measures are designed to promote the connectedness of university students from disadvantaged backgrounds to nature. The implementation of such initiatives would not only contribute to enhancing the mental health and well-being of students but also serve to reinforce institutional commitment to sustainability.

The central objective of this study is to examine the relationship between connectedness to nature (CNS) and conventional sociodemographic variables, including age, sex, place of residence, and socioeconomic level, among Ecuadorian university students.Additionally, we aim to identify significant disparities in CNS among groups categorized by these key sociodemographic characteristics. The attainment of these objectives will provide contextualized evidence on possible inequalities in the perception of and connection to the natural environment within the university population in Ecuador. Furthermore, the study will inform institutional interventions that promote environmental equity and psychosocial well-being in this academic context.

Literature Review

The concept of "connectedness to nature" is understood to signify the relationship that individuals establish with the natural environment, constituting a bond that can be both emotional and cognitive in nature. The measurement of this phenomenon is facilitated by the Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS), a widely recognized instrument developed by Mayer and Frantz in 2004. The instrument's primary focus is on assessing individuals' subjective cognitive connection with nature, emphasizing beliefs about interdependence with the natural environment rather than emotional aspects (Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Navarro et al., 2017; Perrin & Benassi, 2009). Their approach has contributed to a more profound comprehension of the manner in which cognitive beliefs influence the establishment of relationships with the natural environment and the promotion of sustainable behaviors.

In Spanish-speaking contexts, the Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS) has been adapted and validated to ensure its cultural and linguistic applicability, achieving adequate levels of internal consistency and convergent and discriminant validity (Olivos et al., 2013; Pasca et al., 2017). A notable illustration is the condensed seven-item version, which, through analyses grounded in Item Response Theory, has demonstrated its efficacy and reliability in measuring connectedness to nature across diverse populations (Pasca et al., 2017). In addition, the scale has demonstrated positive correlations with constructs such as environmental identity and environmental concerns, thereby reinforcing its usefulness in predicting pro-environmental behaviors in different cultural contexts (Gkargkavouzi et al., 2021; Hatty et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2017). These adaptations underscore the importance of robust tools to explore and understand how connection with nature is established in different regions of the world.

The degree to which individuals feel connected to nature is influenced by a complex interplay of sociodemographic characteristics, cultural influences, and environmental contexts. Gender emerges as a significant differentiating factor in this relationship. Women tend to report a stronger sense of attachment to the natural environment, often attributed to their social roles, engagement in recreational activities such as hiking, and intrinsic motivations related to environmental preservation (van der Linden, 2018). However, gender stereotypes, such as beauty ideals, may

generate dissonance between body perception and connection to nature in certain female groups, evidencing the complexity of this relationship (Whitburn et al., 2020). On the other hand, the place of residence (urban vs. rural) configures substantial differences. A study conducted in Gipuzkoa, Spain, revealed that rural residents establish a more profound connection with nature due to their daily exposure to natural environments. In contrast, urban residents' perception of green spaces as "less authentic" and socioeconomic barriers impede this linkage, particularly among lower-income groups (Olivos & Aragonés, 2011). A comparative study confirmed that rural residents score higher on affective and cognitive dimensions, underscoring the role of geographic context in the construction of environmental identities (Olivos et al., 2013).

Secondly, age influences connections to nature in dynamic ways. During the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence, repeated exposure to natural environments, such as camping, has been shown to cultivate enduring pro-environmental attitudes (Chawla, 1998). For young adults (18-25 years), academic decisions (e.g., pursuing a career in environmental studies vs. engineering) influence their interactions with nature, reflecting variations in education and daily practices (Clayton, 2003). Conversely, older adults exhibit a more profound connection to nature, which is associated with the accumulation of life experiences and the valorization of nature as a source of emotional restoration (Pasca & Aragonés, 2021). Rural women exhibit a more profound connection to nature compared to their urban counterparts, largely attributable to their historical roles in natural resource management and their inherent access to natural environments. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance, rural women are recognized as "natural guardians of life, food, care of nature, mother earth and healthy seeds" (PNUD, 2023, p. 16). In contrast, young adults in urban areas encounter significant obstacles in their interactions with nature. Conversely, children in rural areas, irrespective of their age, exhibit positive environmental attitudes (Castell, 2020; Favara & Moreno, 2020). These findings underscore the necessity for community policies that consider sociodemographic intersections to promote environmental justice and collective well-being (Brinkley & Wagner, 2024; Lehnert, 2022).

Socioeconomic status (SES) has been identified as a significant predictor of individuals' sense of connection to nature, with access to green spaces

and recreational opportunities serving as mediating factors. Research conducted by Soga et al. (2015) indicates that individuals with low SES residing in urban areas have reduced access to quality natural areas, which in turn leads to a diminished emotional connection to the environment. This phenomenon is further substantiated by the observations of Franzini et al. (2010) and Wijtzes et al. (2014), who noted that economic inequality imposes limitations on outdoor activities. Moreover, the lack of economic resources hinders engagement in ecotourism and environmental education, which are pivotal in fostering connectivity (Bello et al., 2017).

The interaction between SES and sociodemographic characteristics serves to amplify existing disparities. For instance, rural women with low SES tend to associate nature more with utilitarian activities, such as agriculture, while those with high SES tend to link it more with recreational activities (De & Ghosh, 2016; Macias-Zambrano et al., 2024b). In urban environments, low-SES adolescents exhibit a reduced sense of connection with conservation concepts, possibly due to the physical distance between their residences and green spaces (Rehling et al., 2021). This phenomenon highlights existing inequalities in environmental health. These dynamics underscore the need for policies that integrate socioeconomic equity and environmental justice (Brinkley & Wagner, 2024; Okereke, 2006).

The relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and connectedness to nature in university students has not been sufficiently explored in the extant literature. While studies conducted in Spanish universities have identified that sustainable consumption does not invariably translate into pro-environmental attitudes or a heightened sense of connection with nature (Fernández et al., 2020), there remains a pressing need to elucidate how individual actions are internalized as environmental commitment within educational settings. A comparative study conducted in European Union countries, including Greece, Poland, and Sweden, has revealed that sociodemographic factors, such as gender, and value orientations exert a more significant influence on connectedness to nature compared to environmental variables in and of themselves. This highlights that individuals with greater economic prosperity and women demonstrate higher levels of connectedness (Mikusiński et al., 2023). This finding underscores the potential yet underutilized role of NSE in university populations. While universal educational initiatives have the potential to fortify this bond (Mikusiński et al., 2023; Neurohr et al., 2023), the

heterogeneity inherent in cultural and contextual differences demands specific studies that examine the intricate interplay among SES, sociodemographic dynamics, and values at the university level, particularly in regions characterized by pronounced socioeconomic disparities.

Methodology

The present study employed quantitative, cross-sectional, and observational research design. The study's population comprised university students enrolled in the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Cuenca (Ecuador). A total sample of 396 participants (132 men and 264 women) was recruited. The study's design was informed by methodologies employed in research on socio-environmental inequalities (Bryman, 2012), employing a two-stage probability sampling technique. In the first stage, the population was stratified by academic semesters, and in the second stage, students were randomly selected from each course, ensuring proportional representation by stratum. The inclusion criteria were as follows: first, the students were required to be actively enrolled; second, they had to belong to any academic semester; third, they had to have voluntarily agreed to participate in the study (informed consent); and fourth, they had to have time to complete the instruments.

The sample size was calculated a priori using G*Power 3.1 software (Faul et al., 2007). To ensure a statistical power of 80% ($\beta = 0.20$) in detecting a small-medium effect (Cohen's $d = 0.3$) in comparisons by sex (t-test for independent groups), with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ and an allocation ratio of 2 (women:men) due to the proportion of these groups in the population, a sample of 396 participants was required.

The present study sought to evaluate the relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and connectedness to nature in university students. To this end, three validated instruments were utilized. Initially, a sociodemographic card was employed to collect fundamental variables, including sex, age, and urban-rural area of residence, adhering to standardized protocols for psychosocial studies (Da Silva et al., 2021). Secondly, the Socioeconomic Level Stratification Survey of the National Institute of Statistics and Census of Ecuador (INEC, 2024) was employed to categorize SES using established indicators of economic characteristics, parental education, and access to fundamental services.

This survey is frequently utilized in local research due to its contextual validity. The levels that can be obtained are: high, upper middle, typical middle, lower middle, and low. Thirdly, the Spanish version of the Connectedness to Nature Scale (CNS) was administered. The aforementioned scale is a tool used to measure the subjective cognitive connection between individuals and nature. This scale has been extensively researched in Anglo-Saxon contexts and has been adapted for use in Spanish-speaking contexts. The CNS has been demonstrated to primarily assess cognitive beliefs concerning connection to nature, as opposed to emotional connections (Olivos et al., 2013; Perrin & Benassi, 2009). In a recent study, the Spanish version of the CNS was analyzed using Item Response Theory. The analysis identified seven items (2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11) that demonstrated adequate discrimination and difficulty indices, along with a satisfactory overall fit. These items were selected to form a reduced version of the scale, which proved to have adequate levels of reliability and validity (Pasca et al., 2017). This selection of items was undertaken to minimize cultural biases and ensure a robust measurement of the construct in university contexts, aligning with recommendations for studies in Latin America (Zolopa et al., 2024).

The data collection procedure was designed in accordance with international ethical standards and institutional guidelines. Following the acquisition of authorization from the relevant academic authorities, data collection was conducted in designated classrooms. Informed consent was obtained by the participants, detailing the objectives of the study, the confidentiality of the data (anonymous coding), and the freedom to withdraw at any time. This was in accordance with the principles of autonomy and non-maleficence as outlined by the APA (American Psychological Association) norms. The participants received the instruments (sociodemographic form, INEC SES survey, and CNS) in physical format, with clear instructions to minimize comprehension bias. The entire process was overseen by trained researchers and adhered to the criteria of scientific integrity and respect for the dignity of the participants established in the Declaration of Helsinki.

The statistical analyses were designed based on the nature of the variables and distribution assumptions. Initially, the normality of the connectivity with nature (CNS) variable was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test (for groups with $n < 50$) and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (for groups with $n \geq 50$), detecting a non-normal distribution ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, non-

parametric methods were chosen for all comparisons. The relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and CNS was analyzed using the Spearman correlation coefficient (rho), while differences between SES groups were assessed using the Kruskal-Wallis test (H). For binary comparisons (sex: men vs. women; residence: urban vs. rural), the Mann-Whitney U test was applied, reporting the U statistic and the magnitude of the effect (r). Homogeneity of variances was verified with Levene's test, and statistical power was calculated a priori using G*Power 3.1, ensuring a power ≥ 80% for small-medium effects (d = 0.3, α = 0.05). All analyses were performed primarily in JASP, while SPSS software was used for normality testing, employing a significance threshold of α = 0.05 and reporting 95% confidence intervals.

Results

The sample comprised 396 university students who were selected through probabilistic sampling, ensuring a representative sociodemographic distribution of the Faculty of Psychology. The proportion of women (66%, n = 264) and men (34%, n = 132) aligns with the prevailing trend of increased female representation in this academic field. The sample included students from the second level (n = 160), the fourth level (n = 54), the sixth level (n = 85), and the eighth level (n = 97).

The average age of women was M = 20.7 years (SD = 2.29), and that of men was M = 21.3 years (SD = 3.21), with no statistically significant differences between the groups. With respect to geographical location, 70% of the participants (n = 277) resided in urban areas, while 30% (n = 119) resided in rural areas, thereby reflecting a geographic diversity relevant to the analysis of connectivity with nature.

The SES of the participants was assessed through the INEC Socioeconomic Level Stratification Survey, which categorized the students into four distinct groups based on their SES: high level (9%, n = 36), upper-middle level (36.6%, n = 145), typical middle level (39.4%, n = 156), and lower-middle level (14.9%, n = 59). It is noteworthy that no participants were classified in the low level category.

Given that the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that SES follows a normal distribution (p = 0.200), but the nature connectivity variable

(NCU) does not (p = 0.000), Spearman's correlation was used to examine their relationship. The findings revealed no statistically significant association (ϱ = -0.023, p = 0.652), indicating that socioeconomic status does not significantly influence the perception of nature connectivity in this sample.

To further compare groups, the normality of the CNS variable within each SES category was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. Significant deviations were found in the upper-middle-class and typical-middle-class categories. Consequently, the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test was applied, the results of which did not reveal significant differences in nature connectivity between the different socioeconomic levels (H(3) = 2.611, p = 0.456). The magnitude of the effect, estimated using ϵ^2, was 0.007, indicating a very small effect. The findings suggest that socioeconomic status does not significantly differentiate nature connectivity among university students (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of Connectedness with Nature (CNS) scores by Socioeconomic Level (SES).
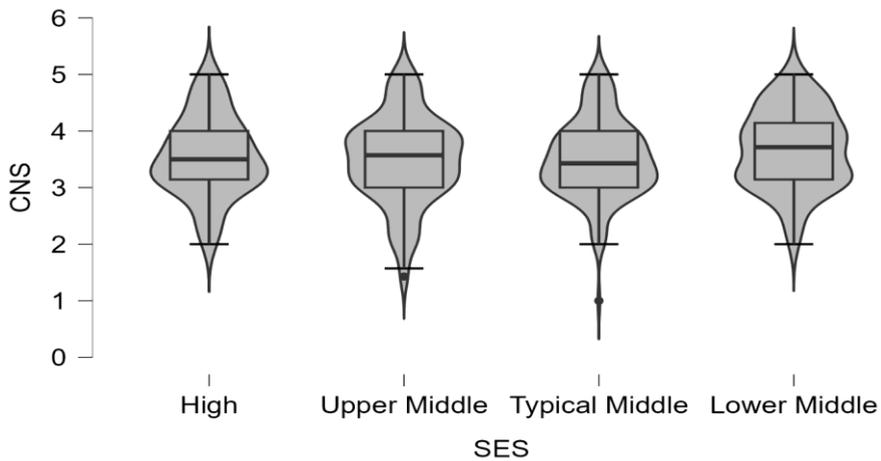
Note: Overlapping densities and similarity in medians reflect the absence of significant differences between groups (H(3) = 2.611, p = 0.456, ϵ^2 = 0.007). Quartiles (inner boxes) and dispersion (violin width) indicate comparable variability between strata.

In order to examine the possible association between age and connectivity with nature, a Spearman correlation was applied. This analysis revealed a

positive but non-significant relationship ($\varrho = 0.041$, p $= 0.415$). This finding suggests that, within the context of this particular sample, age does not exert a substantial influence on individuals' perceptions of connectivity with nature.

To further explore potential disparities in nature connectivity between students residing in urban and rural environments, the Mann-Whitney test was employed. The outcomes of this evaluation revealed no statistically significant differences (U $= 17162.500$, p $= 0.513$, r $= 0.063$), suggesting a negligible effect size. This finding suggests that the geographical location of residence does not significantly influence the perception of connection with nature in this specific population.

A similar approach was adopted to assess gender disparities in connectivity with nature. The Mann-Whitney test revealed no statistically significant differences between the groups (U $= 16244.500$, p $= 0.271$, r $= 0.062$), suggesting a negligible effect size. These findings imply that sex does not act as a differentiating factor in the perception of connectivity with nature within this sample.

The findings indicate a striking uniformity in the perception of connectedness with nature (CNS) among university students, irrespective of conventional sociodemographic variables. Contrary to theoretical predictions, no significant differences in CNS were identified between socioeconomic levels (H(3) $= 2.61$, p $= 0.456$; minimum effect: $\varepsilon^2 = 0.007$), despite the diversity in socioeconomic status (9% high, 36.6% upper-middle, 39.4% typical-middle, 14.9% lower-middle). Similarly, age ($\varrho = 0.041$, p $= 0.415$), place of residence (urban vs. rural: U $= 17162.5$, p $= 0.513$), and sex (U $= 16244.5$, p $= 0.271$) did not demonstrate any association with CNS, even in a robust sample (N $= 396$) representative of a predominantly female academic context (66% women). The findings indicate that, within university populations characterized by high educational homogeneity and access to analogous institutional environments, the presence of a connection with nature may function as a construct that is independent of conventional sociodemographic indicators. This observation prompts inquiries into the moderating influence of educational or cultural factors in environmental perception. The absence of stratification by SES and residence—even in a geographically diverse sample—challenges models that attribute environmental differences to structural inequalities, pointing to the need

to explore psychosocial mediators (e.g., personal values, institutional experiences) in future research.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a general absence of association between connectedness with nature (CNS) and key sociodemographic variables—socioeconomic status (SES), age, sex, and place of residence—in a sample of psychology undergraduates. These results contrast with previous research highlighting the role of SES and geographic setting in shaping environmental experiences. For instance, studies have demonstrated that access to urban green spaces is socioeconomically stratified, favoring higher SES groups (Dai, 2011; Hoffimann et al., 2017; Li & Liu, 2016). However, the present study's findings reveal a novel observation. Specifically, the homogeneity in institutional access to natural environments (e.g., university parks, extracurricular activities) within the present sample potentially neutralizes structural disparities, thereby generating uniform perceptions of CNS across socioeconomic strata.

The absence of disparities between urban and rural residents contradicts studies such as that of Belanche et al. (2021), which establish a correlation between rurality and a stronger emotional connection with the environment. However, these findings are consistent with research that challenges the urban-rural dichotomy, as there are no differences in environmental awareness or care (Soini et al., 2012). Cities like Cuenca, with its integrated green infrastructure (e.g., linear parks, ecological corridors), appear to be eroding the traditional boundaries between urban and rural environments, facilitating more equitable interactions with nature (Bell, 1992).

With respect to gender, the absence of observed differences challenges the findings reported by Triantafyllidis & Darvin (2021) and Pérez-Ramírez et al. (2021). These studies reported a greater connection with nature among women; however, the university context has not been specifically studied. However, in university populations, factors such as academic socialization—which emphasizes environmental values independent of gender—could potentially mitigate these differences. This phenomenon is exemplified by the study conducted by Di Fabio & Rosen (2019) in Italy, which examined university students and found no significant differences in their connection with nature based on their sex.

The absence of a correlation between age and CNS may be attributable to the variability in the association between these two variables across the stages of life. According to the findings, this connectivity undergoes a decline during middle and late adolescence, followed by an increase in early adulthood (Yang et al., 2023). Consequently, the limited age range of the present research, coupled with the transitional nature of this stage—where academic factors predominate over environmental experiences—could account for the absence of variation. It is also noteworthy that the extant literature contains findings that are both consistent with and inconsistent with the hypothesized positive association between age and CNS. Specifically, there is evidence that individuals who are older have a greater connection with nature (Carney & Patrick, 2019), but there is also evidence that pro-environmental behavior has been inversely associated with age (Krettenauer et al., 2020).

These findings call into question the universality of classic models linking connectedness to nature to sociodemographic markers. The results suggest that, in homogeneous institutional contexts, academic training and exposure to shared environments act as key moderating factors. This raises the need to reformulate environmental theories to incorporate psychoeducational variables (e.g., ecologically focused curricula, extracurricular activities in nature). From a pragmatic standpoint, these results lend support to university initiatives that aim to cultivate connectedness to nature through structured programs, irrespective of the sociodemographic profile of the student body.

Conclusions

The results of this study contradict long-standing assumptions in the environmental literature by demonstrating that the connection of university students to nature is not influenced by traditional sociodemographic variables, such as socioeconomic status (SES), age, sex, and place of residence. Contrary to prior research linking structural inequalities with disparities in environmental experiences (Hoffimann et al., 2017; Li & Liu, 2016), this sample exhibited no substantial stratification in CNS, despite notable geographic and socioeconomic diversity. This finding suggests that homogeneous academic environments could act as psycho-environmental equalizers, neutralizing external disparities through

institutional policies, shared access to green spaces, and socialization in ecological values (Di Fabio & Rosen, 2019).

The absence of differences between urban and rural contexts highlights the importance of re-evaluating geographic dichotomies in cities with integrated green infrastructure, such as Cuenca. These results challenge the prevailing models that automatically associate rurality with greater natural connection (Belanche et al., 2021). Instead, the quality and accessibility of urban green environments—rather than their mere classification—are critical determinants of CNS (Soini et al., 2012).

In addition, the homogeneity of CNS between sexes is at odds with studies that report a greater environmental connection in women (Triantafyllidis & Darvin, 2021), but it does align with the hypothesis that academic training in egalitarian contexts can weaken traditional gender roles (Soltanpanah et al., 2018). This underscores the potential of universities as spaces that can transform socio-environmental norms, capable of fostering cohesive ecological perceptions.

The cross-sectional design and the narrow age range preclude the generalizability of the findings over time; nevertheless, they furnish valuable evidence on the resilience of CNS to structural variables in educational populations. This suggests that, in educational contexts with integrated environmental policies, CNS can develop equitably, transcending structural barriers that often influence other dimensions of well-being. Future research should explore underlying psychosocial mechanisms (e.g., environmental identity, intrinsic values) that could explain this homogeneity. Furthermore, replicating the study in disciplines with greater sociodemographic diversity (e.g., engineering, natural sciences) would allow us to determine whether these findings reflect a universal phenomenon in academic environments or are limited to specific contexts.

Moreover, this research contributes to theoretical debates on the universality of CNS and offers a practical framework for educational institutions committed to sustainability. By acknowledging the homogenizing influence of university campuses, the opportunity arises for structured interventions that facilitate engagement with nature as a universal right, irrespective of one's origin or identity.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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CURRENT TRENDS IN ACADEMIC SOCIAL WORK TRAINING – A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract*: Undergraduate social work education is evolving through the integration of social responsibility, holistic student support, educational partnerships and the use of digital technologies. Programmes emphasise social justice and a culture of non-violence, ensuring adequate professional and ethical training. Psychological and social support becomes a priority for student success, and collaboration with employers and alumni helps improve training. The digitalisation of education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, offers new opportunities for teaching and learning. Review-type analyses can provide insight into current trends in university training programmes. The present research, although limited in scope, manages to identify a number of key directions for academic training in social work. Current courses reflect contemporary issues by addressing social responsibility, poverty alleviation, mental health and technology. Professional ethics and the need for educational standards tailored to the diversity of students are emphasised. Anti-poverty strategies are integrated into programmes to provide effective solutions. Mental health becomes increasingly important, including innovative interventions such as animal-assisted therapy. The use of technology in social work education contributes to improved learning. Courses on digital social innovation, mental health, social entrepreneurship and soft skills development are recommended. Digitisation in social care is becoming essential and training on topics such as cyber safety and social networking can support modern interventions. Adapting the*

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curriculum is essential to meet today's social needs and to train competent professionals. This process must take into account changes in the field, labour market requirements and the integration of interdisciplinary perspectives. A well-structured programme ensures an adequate preparation for future social workers, providing them with the necessary competences to respond effectively to community challenges.

Keywords: *social work education, new trends, curriculum, interdisciplinary approach, innovation, digitisation, social responsibility*

Introduction

The field of social work education has seen significant developments in recent years, particularly in response to global challenges and the need for more effective training methods. A comprehensive review of recent literature can reveal several key themes and findings that are crucial to understanding the current landscape of social work education. One prominent theme is the need for reform in social work training programmes; more and more authors are emphasising the importance of social work training in terms of professional development that encourages active participation in policy formulation and programme development, highlighting the need for educational institutions to take a more proactive approach in reforming curricula to better serve their communities (Erasmus & Bloem, 2023). Increasingly, there is advocacy for collaborative efforts in curriculum development and exchanges between faculties to enhance cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness in social work education (Adewusi et al., 2024). Such reforms are essential for preparing future social workers to effectively address the complex dimensions of global challenges.

Integrating practice experience through field placements is increasingly recognised as a critical component of social work education. The importance of training by placing future professionals inenvironment in which they will work and its impact on learning outcomes is discussed, suggesting that high quality internships are vital for professional development (Caspersen & Smeby, 2020). A combination of traditional, classroom-based learning and practical, field-based applications enriches the educational experience by helping students internalise the core values of social work (Butler-Warke & Bolger, 2020). The significance of field-

based education as a pedagogical norm is also reinforced by critical observations about the need for practice experiences and their unpaid ethical implications for the social work profession (Drechsler, Beasley, & Singh, 2023).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social work education has prompted a reassessment of traditional teaching methods. Discussions of the challenges and opportunities presented by distance learning during the pandemic are topical, noting that while there are obstacles to achieving educational goals, there is also potential for innovative pedagogical strategies. This reflects a broader trend in the literature, which argues the need for social work education to adapt to contemporary challenges through the lens of complexity theory, ensuring that educational practices remain relevant and effective (McDermott, 2021).

Objectives

The main objective of the paper was to identify new trends in the literature in the field of social work undergraduate education. The elements we took into consideration were: the changing directions of undergraduate education, the themes and topics covered in newly introduced courses, the basic aspects that are retained in professional training, emerging topics of study and curricular issues. The secondary objective was to attempt a bibliometric analysis of the papers analysed.

Research Methodology

The literature review was carried out by querying the Google Schoolar database using combinations of descriptors: „new trends", „current trends", „social work training", „university education", „higher education", „main topics", „themes", „university courses", „proposals" and „curricula". A total of 108 results were subjected to a content analysis (title, abstract and keywords) following relevance-based selection by the search engine. Subsequently, 24 papers were included in this narrative review. The qualitative content analysis is summarised inappended table. Bibliometric data were entered into the VoSviwer programme. Keyword analysis was a separate step.

Results and Discussions

1. Current directions of development of university education in social work

The evolution of undergraduate education in social work is increasingly characterised by a focus on social responsibility, supporting students through a variety of means and integrating innovative pedagogical approaches. This multi-dimensional development reflects a growing recognition of the need for universities to prepare students not only academically, but also socially and ethically prepared for their roles in social work in a rapidly changing society.

One significant direction is the emphasis on social responsibility, even in teacher training programmes; university training should foster a commitment to social justice and a culture of non-violence, core values for future social work teachers (Valdivia, Palomino, & Burgos-Garcia, 2020). This is aligned by work that discusses the importance of social work students acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively contribute to community well-being (Shah, 2020). The integration of social responsibility into university educational frameworks is crucial for the development of professionals who are not only competent in their fields but also aware of their social impact in the community; thus, a real awareness of the complex social role of the social worker can be achieved without which sustainable wellbeing of both professionals and service recipients cannot be generated.

Holistic student support is becoming a priority in academic settings; the literature emphasises the importance of both academic and social support systems to facilitate student success, particularly through programmes that encourage social integration (Naidoo, Byles, & Kwenaite, 2021). Another dimension is that which advocates for psychological support models that address students' personal and professional development, thereby enhancing their overall educational experience (Postavnev, Alisov, Postavneva, Podymova, & Ginting, 2020). Such initiatives are essential to address the various challenges faced by students in social work programmes, ensuring they are well prepared for future roles.

The role of social partnerships in modernising education is gaining momentum. There is increasing discussion about how collaborative approaches between universities, employers and graduates can improve the training of future social work professionals (Sadykova, 2024). This partnership model not only aligns educational outcomes with labour market needs, but also fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility among social work stakeholders.

Incorporating digital technologies and innovative teaching methods is another critical trend. The shift towards e-learning and the use of social networking for educational purposes have been highlighted as vital tools for engaging students and improving learning outcomes (Yasa, 2022). This was particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a rapid transition to distance learning. This transition, although challenging, has also opened up new avenues for educational delivery and student engagement (Bulatova et al., 2021).

Current directions in undergraduate social work education reflect a comprehensive approach that integrates social responsibility, holistic student support, collaborative partnerships and innovative teaching methodologies. These developments are essential for preparing future professionals who are equipped with the skills and knowledge to address the complex social issues they will encounter in their careers.

2. Main topics and themes covered in the latest courses introduced in social work faculties

Courses recently introduced in social work faculties worldwide reflect a dynamic response to contemporary social issues, emphasising themes such as social responsibility, poverty reduction, mental health and the integration of technology in social work education. These themes are essential in preparing students to address the complexities of social work in a rapidly changing world.

One of the prominent themes is the focus on social responsibility and ethical practice in social work education; social responsibility should be a core component of undergraduate programmes, highlighting the need for future educators to engage with issues of social justice and ethical standards (Valdivia et al., 2020). Other findings emphasise the importance of evolving educational standards to prioritise outcomes that reflect social

responsibility, particularly in the context of diverse student populations (Morley & Clarke, 2020). Integrating these principles into course content is essential to fostering engagement with ethical practice among students.

The reduction of poverty and social inequality remain central topics in social work education, with courses increasingly addressing the complexities of these two interrelated phenomena in both rich and poor countries. They discuss the effectiveness of social assistance programmes in reducing child poverty, highlighting the need for targeted approaches that can be adapted to different socio-economic contexts (Cai & Smeeding, 2019). The shift in social protection strategies from simply maintaining incomes and reducing inequality to broader socioeconomic development, which is increasingly embedded in social assistance programmes (Cruz-Martínez, 2019), is precisely a practical approach that departs from the general idea of increasing equality, opportunity and reducing poverty. This development reflects a recognition of the multiple nature of poverty and the need for comprehensive strategies to combat it.

Mental health is another critical area that is present in recent courses in many university programmes. The integration of animal-assisted interventions in educational settings is gaining increasing prominence, acting as a means to improve student well-being and social interaction (Rothkopf & Schworm, 2021). Research indicates that such interventions can significantly improve mental health outcomes for students, making them a valuable component of social support programmes (Parbery-Clark, Lubamba, Tanner, & McColl, 2021). This approach aligns with the wider trend to incorporate holistic support mechanisms into social work education, recognising the importance of mental health in social work practice.

The role of technology in social work education is increasing; the use of social networks and digital platforms for educational purposes is becoming more and more widespread. The transformative impact of social networks on communication and learning in higher education is discussed (Babić, Vilović, & Tomić, 2020). This trend has become particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has necessitated a rapid shift to online learning environments (Bulatova et al., 2021). Adapting educational methodologies to include digital tools becomes essential for preparing students to effectively engage with contemporary social issues.

3. Core elements of social work undergraduate courses

The core elements of undergraduate courses in social work have remained relatively consistent over the years, reflecting core values and competences essential for effective social work practice. These elements encompass a variety of themes, with particular emphasis on social justice, fostering community involvement, ethical practice (respect for the inherent dignity and worth of the person) and interdisciplinary approaches.

Courses that focus on social justice usually include discussions of the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion, which are crucial to understanding the systemic issues affecting marginalised populations. This approach is in line with a number of findings that emphasise the importance of integrating central aspects of critical race theory into social work education to address the structural inequities faced by historically oppressed communities (Fariña et al., 2021). Critical race theory is a significant framework for analysing and addressing systemic racism and its implications in different domains, particularly in education. With roots in legal studies, the theory posits that race is a social construct that shapes societal structures and individual experiences, particularly for marginalised communities. This theoretical approach emphasises the importance of narratives and counter-narratives, enabling individuals in these communities to articulate their lived experiences and challenge dominant narratives that often perpetuate racial inequities (Kelly, 2023; Lynn & Parker, 2006; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Such discussions are vital to the preparation of students, who learn to advocate for social change and understand the complexities of social work in broader societal contexts

Mobilising, involving and empowering communities are other fundamental elements of social work training and education. Education and training programmes often require students to participate in fieldwork or community service, enabling them to apply theoretical knowledge in real settings. This experiential learning underlines the importance of community social programmes in fostering community engagement and increasing social well-being (Chan, Ryan, & Quarter, 2016). Involving students in community practice not only enriches their learning experiences, but also reinforces the importance of collaboration and partnership in social work.

Ethical practice is also a critical theme that courses consistently address. Students are taught the ethical standards and responsibilities that govern

social work practice, which include confidentiality, informed consent and the importance of professional integrity. This is particularly relevant in light of the ongoing challenges in social work, discussing the need for practitioners to address complex ethical dilemmas in their work (Öktem & Erdogan, 2019). The focus on ethics ensures that future social workers are adequately trained to handle sensitive situations with professionalism and respect for the dignity and rights of the people with whom they interact.

Interdisciplinary approaches are increasingly recognised as essential in social work education. Courses often incorporate perspectives from psychology, sociology, public health and economics to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence social well-being. An increasing number of studies discuss the role of social welfare programmes in supporting community well-being, particularly in the context of economic challenges (Rahmawati et al., 2022). By integrating knowledge across disciplines, students are better prepared to develop holistic solutions to social problems.

These themes, as well as several others, old and new (e.g. ecological social work), are fundamental to equip students with the skills and knowledge to effectively address the challenges they face in social work. The prioritisation of curricular themes, the introduction or removal of some of them must become an active and evaluative process in order to maintain the relevance of social work student preparation with today's dynamic social life landscape.

4. Emerging topics and themes in social work training

In the evolving landscape of social work education, it is essential to introduce innovative courses and topics that reflect the current needs of society and prepare future social workers for the complexity of their roles. Based on recent literature, some valuable suggestions for courses or topics can be identified, focusing on areas such as digital social innovation, mental health interventions, social entrepreneurship and the integration of technology in social work practice.

An important area for course development is digital social innovation. Increasingly, the need for school social workers to respond effectively to crises and threats, particularly in the context of digital environments, is

emphasised (Marzano, Lizut, & Ochoa, 2019). Courses that focus on digital competencies, including the development of cyber safety programmes and the use of social media for psychosocial interventions, would equip students with the necessary skills to navigate contemporary challenges in the school environment and beyond. This aligns with the growing recognition of the role of technology in improving social work practice.

Another critical topic is mental health and well-being. A body of work highlights the evolving nature of hospital social care, requiring programmes to reflect the latest developments in mental health interventions (Muskat, Anthony, Mishna, & Greenblatt, 2018). Courses covering trauma-informed care, crisis intervention strategies and integration of mental health services into social care programmes are becoming of particular importance. This focus is particularly relevant given the increasing prevalence of mental health problems among diverse populations, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social entrepreneurship is also a vital area for inclusion in the course curriculum. It discusses the role of community social workers as social entrepreneurs, highlighting innovative models of care that can be implemented within social service agencies (Nouman & Cnaan, 2023). Courses exploring the principles of social entrepreneurship, including coalition building, advocacy and resource development, would empower future social workers to create sustainable solutions to social problems. This approach not only encourages innovation but also encourages a proactive attitude in addressing community needs.

In addition, integrating training in acquiring or improving communication and soft skills is essential for preparing social workers to engage effectively with clients and colleagues. Research indicates a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and social innovation, suggesting that lectures that focus on emotional intelligence, communication skills and conflict resolution could improve social workers' professional capabilities (Khalaf, 2022). Such training would be beneficial in fostering empathic and effective practitioners who can navigate the complexities of human interactions in their future work.

The use of online educational resources and platforms for training future social workers is increasingly relevant. We can identify work that highlights the potential of open online courses to broaden the professional

experience of social workers (Savelchuk, Andriichuk, & Bybyk, 2022). Incorporating online learning modules that cover different aspects of social work practice, including innovative service delivery models and community engagement strategies, would provide students with flexible and accessible learning opportunities.

5. Social work training curricula

Paying particular attention to the undergraduate social work curriculum is crucial for a number of reasons, including the need to adapt to evolving societal challenges, the importance of preparing competent professionals and the need to integrate diverse perspectives in social work education. These factors collectively emphasise the importance of a well-structured, adapted and responsive curriculum.

First, the dynamic nature of societal challenges requires social work programmes to remain relevant and responsive. It is evident that social work education has undergone significant changes to embrace a generalist model that prioritises the person-in-environment paradigm, reflecting the need for practitioners to address complex social problems effectively (Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020). This adaptability is essential for preparing students to deal with contemporary challenges such as poverty, inequality, and mental health crises, which have been exacerbated by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Apostol, Irimescu, & Rădoi, 2023). By focusing on current issues, curricula can equip students with the knowledge and skills to effectively respond to the needs of diverse populations.

Second, the training of competent professionals is paramount in social work. A growing body of evidence emphasises the importance of high-impact educational practices, such as group work, in developing the values and skills necessary for effective social work practice (Ericksen & Williamson-Ashe, 2021). Involving students in collaborative learning experiences fosters critical thinking, empathy and communication skills that are essential for successful interactions with beneficiaries and communities. In addition, the integration of hands-on experiences, is vital for developing competence through practice and deliberate feedback (Ossais et al., 2021). This hands-on approach ensures that students are well prepared on graduation for the realities of social work practice.

In addition, integrating diverse perspectives into social work education is crucial for promoting more inclusive and equitable practice. The emphasis on anti-oppressive approaches reflects the need for curricula to address issues of injustice and inequality in social work practice (Amadasun, 2020). By incorporating diverse cultural, social and political perspectives, curricula can prepare students to engage with beneficiaries from diverse backgrounds and effectively advocate for social change. This is particularly relevant in the context of globalisation, where social workers have to operate in a complex landscape of cultural differences and power dynamics.

Moreover, incorporating emerging topics, such as the integration of technology into social work practice, is increasingly important. Îincorporating disaster response components into the curriculum can improve student preparedness for extreme events and crises (Wu, 2021). This advanced approach ensures that social work education remains relevant in an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

Paying increased attention to the undergraduate social work curriculum is essential for adapting to societal challenges, preparing competent professionals, integrating diverse perspectives and embracing emerging themes. A responsive and comprehensive curriculum not only enhances the educational experience for students, but ultimately contributes to the effectiveness and relevance of social work practice in addressing the complex needs of individuals and communities.

6. Bibliometric and keyword analysis

The bibliometric analysis of the set of articles on current trends in undergraduate social work education and training does not reveal any co-authorship or keyword correlations, this can be explained by several factors. There may be thematic fragmentation and lack of common direction; social work is an interdisciplinary field and the topics covered can be very diverse (e.g. social policy, professional practice, ethics, digitisation, digitalisation, practice training, curriculum, etc.) Each researcher or team may work on niche topics, making it difficult to identify consistent groups of co-authors or a common set of keywords. Co-authorship networks may be underdeveloped and under-strengthened. Authors in the field of social work education and training may publish

individually or in small teams without extensive collaborations. Without well-developed academic networks, no significant clusters will emerge in co-authorship analyses. Inconsistent use of keywords seems to be a practical situation present here. Authors use different terms for similar concepts, which reduces the chances of correlation between keywords. For example, „social education" vs. „social work training" may denote similar issues but are labelled differently. Using clear standards for the choice of keywords makes it possible to group relevant items correctly. Regional and contextual differences are particularly important in the field analysed. Studies on social work education are influenced by national specificities: educational policies, structure of university programmes, research priorities. The size and quality of the dataset can be an important vulnerability in review analyses. If the number of articles analysed is small, relationships between authors or concepts may not be evident

Although bibliometric analysis could not be performed, keyword analysis identifies several relevant aspects. In terms of frequency and main themes, keywords are organised into several areas of interest such as:

- Education for sustainable development: „education for sustainable development", „sustainability", „United Nations Sustainable Development Goals", „global learning".

- International and Comparative Education: „internationalisation of the curriculum", „PISA Global Competence Framework", „Comparative Analysis", „foreign countries", „student attitudes".

- Professional and interdisciplinary education: „professional education", „interdisciplinary approach", „higher education", „graduate students", „undergraduate students", „student participation", „innovation".

- Social justice and decolonisation: „social justice", „decolonisation", „epistemologies", „anti-oppressive education", „social empowerment".

- Education and curriculum policy: „curriculum policy", „curricular and instructional policies", „curriculum reform", „problem-solving skills".

- Social work and social policy: „social work education", „green social work", „social welfare", „social protection", „policy", „telebehavioural health training".

- Distance education and pedagogy: „distance education", „pedagogy", „e-simulations", „high impact practices", „collaborative learning", „teaching methods".

- Global change and environment: „climate change", „disasters", „green social work", „KZN floods".

- Evaluation of educational programmes: „programme assessment", „field education", „skills assessment", „COVID-19".

Another perspective is the logical connection between the terms used. Education for sustainable development is linked to social justice and climate change („sustainability", „green social work", „social justice"). Internationalisation of the curriculum is linked to comparative education and intercultural competence development („intercultural competence development", „PISA Global Competence Framework", „business education", „global learning"). Professional and interdisciplinary education intersects with curriculum policy and educational assessment („higher education", „professionalisation", „educational quality", „student surveys"). Social work appears in multiple contexts, including social policy, education and health („social work education", „social protection", „telebehavioural health training", „leadership", „collaboration"). Decolonisation and alternative epistemologies are associated with social justice and curriculum reform („decolonisation", „epistemologies", „social-justice", „anti-oppressive education", „social change"). Distance education and modern pedagogical methods are linked to innovation and the impact of technology on education („distance education", „e-simulations", „teaching methods", „collaborative learning"). COVID-19 and educational assessment suggest a concern for the impact of pandemics on training („programme assessment", „skills assessment", „field education").

Entries marked „N.A." (as can be seen in the Appendix) indicate a lack of specific information or categories (keywords); although these papers were included in the narrative review, they could not be analysed by keywords. Libya and Ethiopia are mentioned in an educational and political context, suggesting an analysis of educational systems or policies in these countries.

„Revisioning" is an isolated word, which suggests a process of re-imagining education, but without a common context for multiple articles. There is an overlap between education for sustainable development, social education and curriculum policies, indicating a holistic approach in studying these topics.

Conclusions

This review, although limited in terms of the number of papers included in the analysis, has managed to identify a number of current trends in social work education. Further analyses, using a systematic methodology, will be able to better orient us towards quality professional training adapted to society's current needs

Integrating social responsibility into undergraduate education - The training of future social workers places an increasing emphasis on social justice, a culture of non-violence and an awareness of their impact in the community. These issues are essential to prepare professionals who not only have technical skills but also a deep understanding of their social role.

Holistic student support and educational partnerships - It is becoming increasingly clear that universities need to develop both academic and psychosocial support mechanisms to facilitate student integration and success. Partnerships between universities, employers and graduates also help to better adapt training programmes to professional realities and labour market needs.

Adoption of digital technologies and innovative teaching methods - The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the transition to e-learning, highlighting the importance of digitisation of university education. The use of new technologies and interactive teaching methods play a significant role in enhancing the educational experience and student engagement. Curricula need to promote inclusive approaches and include emerging topics, such as the use of technology and disaster response, to ensure relevant training in a globalised and digitised world.

Adapting social work programmes to today's challenges - New courses introduced in social work faculties reflect an increased concern for social responsibility, mental health, poverty reduction and the integration of technology in education. These themes are central to the training of

future social workers, enabling them to respond effectively to emerging social problems.

Expanding educational approaches through innovation and interdisciplinarity - New trends in social work education include both innovative methods, such as animal-assisted interventions, and the use of digital technologies and social networks as teaching tools. These changes enhance both the educational experience and the practical preparation of students.

Orientation of education towards a holistic approach to social work - Training programmes place increased emphasis on student well-being and the development of key competences to combat social inequalities. This emphasises the need for a balance between academic theory and practical applicability in diverse social and economic contexts.

Continuity and adaptability of fundamentals - Undergraduate social work courses retain a number of core themes such as social justice, community involvement, ethical practice and interdisciplinary approaches. They ensure the development of the competences needed for effective social intervention, while the integration of new concepts, such as ecological social work, reflects the adaptability of the field to new social realities.

Experiential learning and interdisciplinarity as pillars of training - Undergraduate programmes place an increasing emphasis on practical learning through fieldwork and community service, giving students the opportunity to apply theory in real-life contexts. In addition, the integration of perspectives from sociology, psychology, public health and economics enables them to develop holistic solutions to complex social problems.

The need for continuous updating of the curriculum - In order to maintain the relevance of social work education, it is essential to constantly re-evaluate the content of courses so that they reflect the current challenges of society. By adapting programmes to social, economic and technological changes, universities can ensure that future social workers are adequately prepared. Social work programmes need to be dynamic and responsive to current issues such as poverty, inequality and mental health crises in order to prepare students to intervene effectively in complex social contexts.

The importance of developing social-emotional competences - The training of social workers should include the development of communication, emotional intelligence and conflict resolution skills, as these contribute to creating professionals who are empathic and able to manage complex interactions with clients and colleagues.

Use of technology in education and practice - Online educational resources and digital platforms offer flexible learning opportunities and allow social workers to access innovative models of intervention, thus contributing to training that is more relevant to the demands of today's profession.

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BUILDING BRIDGE: COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM IN ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY AND THE PRACTICE OF UKHUWWAH (BROTHERHOOD)

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***Abstract**: Economic inequality remains a pressing issue in Indonesia. Addressing this challenge requires government intervention and active engagement from higher education institutions. Although not immediately apparent, higher education plays a vital role in economic development, particularly community capacity-building through community empowerment programs. Islamic university, in particular, is interested in promoting the principles of Ukhuwwah (brotherhood) in community empowerment as a manifestation of Islam as a rahmatan lil 'ālamīn (mercy for all the worlds). This research looks at how community empowerment programs have evolved in Islamic universities. The study focuses on the current situation and has required features for community-engaged universities. The research findings will help us better understand how Indonesian colleges operate with their local communities. The Assisted Village programs (Desa Binaan) at Indonesian State Islamic University serve as case studies to demonstrate the methodologies and propose a framework for community empowerment programs by actualizing the principles of Ukhuwwah (brotherhood) to foster social and economic development within communities.*

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Introduction

Economic and community development goals are quite similar (Lejano & Taufen Wessells, 2006); community development aims to create assets that strengthen community capability, while economic development aims to deploy assets to offer economic benefits. Both definitions pertain to the same assets: human, financial, and physical resources (environment or natural resources) (Moser, 2008). A more recent comprehensive definition of economic growth includes enhancing all societies' quality of life and living standards, rather than only assets and job creation (Phillips & Pittman, 2014). The two main goals of developing economies are (1) job creation and wealth, and (2) enhanced quality of life. The first goal frequently leads to the second, although society's business components are usually the focus (Gallardo, 2015). To summarize, the gap between community and economic development boils down to one strategy (community development) that focuses on larger social concerns rather than employment and business, and the other approach (economic development) that focuses primarily on jobs and business (Pittman et al., 2009). Both are communal or regional procedures. The only difference between the two terms is how they look at assets. In community development, assets can be generated, such as skills and expertise, through training programs, and used to increase the community's social and economic capacity so that it can face the challenges of dynamic world changes while still developing economically (Harrison et al., 2019).

Economic development in Indonesia is not solely the government's responsibility but also a shared responsibility of higher education institutions, albeit indirectly (Welch, 2012). Higher education institutions are today viewed as institutions that have a broader impact on society and economics locally and nationally, rather than simply giving knowledge to new generations (Tilak, 2008). Moreover, due to their projected impact on spatial knowledge creation, innovation, and social changes, higher education institutions have been identified as crucial players in the industrial revitalization and regional economic growth (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Dallago, 2014; OECD, 2014). The role of higher education institutions is in line with the current economic development

paradigm which emphasizes sustainability with a focus on equality, justice, and enhancing the quality of human resources, rather than focusing just on economic growth (Khan & Khan, 2017). Sustainable economic development aims to address poverty reduction and the root causes of poverty. Poverty is a severe issue because individuals are caught in a cycle of poverty. The vicious cycle of poverty is a set of interconnected variables that produce situations in which individuals feel powerless, stuck, and find it difficult to overcome poverty (Andreoni & Miola, 2016). Community economic empowerment, which follows the notion of sustainable economic development, is one of the efforts that may be made to break the vicious cycle of poverty (Federico Cingano, 2014).

The current economic condition of Indonesia is still grappling with the issue of inequality, particularly among rural communities, according to the survey results of the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) of the government of Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024), the number of poor people in March 2024 was 25.22 million (9.03%), of which 11.79% (2.97 million people) were rural poor. This figure is significantly higher than the poor urban population of 7.09% (1.79 million people). The reality of village community life depicts paradoxical circumstances: on the one hand, the village possesses local potential that may be exploited, but on the other hand, the community's economic well-being remains deficient. The BPS survey reinforces the survey conducted by the Ministry of Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Region, and Transmigration (Kemendes, DT) Government of Indonesia in 2024, which showed that the majority of villages in Indonesia are classified as developing villages (32,83%), which have strong resources, economic, and ecological potential to improve the welfare of the village community but are not being managed effectively (Kemendes_DT, 2019). To address these issues, local potential-based community economic empowerment is considered the best course of action, because the community becomes the driving force behind change (Arismayanti et al., 2019; Dewi, 2020). Villages have different economic characteristics compared to cities, with most rural populations being farmers and agricultural laborers with little land ownership who work in the informal (Winarwan, 2021). Rice agrarian land is usually rainfed, with harvesting occurring just twice a year, raising the amount of unpredictability and relying heavily on season circumstances (Bafdal, 2016). The ability to satisfy basic requirements of life, such as clothes, food, and shelter, is severely limited when agricultural products are used

as a source of income. Furthermore, these individuals rely completely on the money generated by farming on the property of others. Villages are crucial in Indonesia's economy, particularly in contributing to the food sector (Winarwan, 2021). As it is known, most food crop production comes from rural areas. Despite this, the condition of rural communities is still far from ideal.

Given the economic conditions of villages, rural communities have become the primary target of community empowerment initiatives by Islamic universities, as part of their Community Service activities. This program attempts to improve the community's well-being by maximizing the potential of locally accessible resources, such as natural, human, economic, social, customary, and cultural resources (Team Desa Binaan, 2023). However, community empowerment programs are often designed with a one-size-fits-all approach, neglecting the specific cultural and socio-economic contexts of individual communities. Instead of creating sustainable programs, they often end up being one-off projects (Ceptureanu et al., 2018). This challenge highlights the importance of designing community empowerment programs that are contextually relevant and tailored to the specific needs of each community. By addressing these unique characteristics, initiatives can focus on sustainable solutions, such as enhancing the family economy through creative economy businesses, conducting training for handicraft and traditional food production using local ingredients, and improving community competence to boost productivity in existing business ventures.

Islamic universities, in addition to having the responsibility of carrying out development, also have the responsibility of promoting Islam as a mercy for all the world (*rahmatan lil ʿālamīn*) (Desmaniar et al., 2022). Departing from this, implementing the principles of *Ukhuwwah* (brotherhood) becomes an important element as a manifestation of Islam as a mercy for all the world. *Ukhuwwah* is often interpreted exclusively as Islamic brotherhood, although the term originates from Islamic teachings (Jamil et al., 2023). *Ukhuwwah* comes from an Arabic term that translates to brotherhood or unity, this term encompasses not only the bonds between individuals but also the broader connections that unite communities and societies under the principles of faith, mutual support, and compassion (Ulum, 2017). *Ukhuwwah* as a form of human brotherhood is highly relevant to community service that focuses on the humanitarian aspect

(Mohamed & Ofteringer, 2015). Research on the implementation of *Ukhuwwah* principles that prioritize humanitarian aspects in community empowerment remains scarce. Several studies that mention this principle often discuss it within the broader framework of Islamic-based community empowerment, without providing an in-depth focus on *Ukhuwwah* as the primary concept (Ibrahim & Riyadi, 2023)(Alamsyah et al., 2022). Yet, this principle offers solutions with the potential to enhance social solidarity and create a more harmonious environment within society.

This study examines the concept of community empowerment in Islamic universities in Indonesia, particularly how the principles of *Ukhuwwah* are implemented within it. Through service projects that emphasize the achievement of common goals, how can Islamic universities in Indonesia develop their community participation? To find the answer, we will first evaluate the extent to which community service has taken shape in a specific case of community empowerment in Islamic universities in Indonesia; we will examine how the concept has been interpreted and recommend how the principles of *Ukhuwwah* are applied in community empowerment programs.

Methods

Case Study

The Assisted Village Program, one of the community empowerment activities at the state Islamic University/*Universitas Islam Negeri* (UIN) of Raden Intan Lampung, Indonesia, serves as a case study. This program focuses on empowering the rural economy by supporting economic development through fostering creative enterprises. It includes training activities in local craft production and traditional food processing using local ingredients. The training aims to enhance community skills in their respective trades, thereby increasing productivity (Team Desa Binaan, 2023). The target villages for the program at UIN Raden Intan include villages in two districts of Lampung Province: Bandungbaru Village in Pringsewu District, and Wai Sari and Sumber Jaya Villages in South Lampung District. These three villages share similar characteristics, particularly regarding their primary occupation as rain-fed farmers, with most of the population having primary and secondary education levels.

**Table 1. Occupation and education levels of the target villages**

No	Criteria	Bandungbaru	Wai Sari	Sumber Jaya
1	Rain-fed farmer	13,29%	21,06%	25,54%
2	Education levels:			
	SMP (Secondary)	43,28%	20,7%	22,14%
	SMA (Primary)	31,54%	21,48%	19,19%

Source: BPS Lampung Selatan and Pringsewu (processed data)

Evaluation Criteria

This study employs qualitative methodologies and field investigation using Daniel L. Stufflebeam's CIPP (Context, Input, Process, and Product) evaluation model. The CIPP model is a comprehensive framework for formative and summative evaluations. In other words, the CIPP model is an evaluation of the program's impact (summative) and its process (formative) (Stufflebeam, 2003). CIPP evaluation consists of four interrelated components, the relationship between the four components is illustrated in the following image (Stufflebeam, 2015):

Figure 1. Relationship of CIPP evaluation components
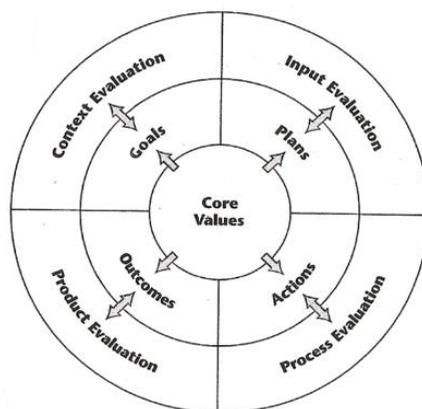
The CIPP evaluation describes how the Assisted Village program was implemented to promote community empowerment in Lampung Province. The basic goal of the CIPP evaluation technique is to improve rather than to prove something. The evaluation criteria for the Assisted

Village program based on the CIPP model are presented in the following table:

Table 2. CIPP evaluating criteria in an assisted village program

No	Aspect	Components Evaluated	Evaluation Criteria	Instrument
1	Context	Program needs for institutions and communities/villages	Implementation of FGDs involving community participation to formulate program needs for institutions and communities/villages and to determine the alignment between the service program and the university's vision and mission.	Interview and documentation
		Issues within the community/village	Preliminary surveys to identify issues within the community/village.	Interview and documentation
		Program objectives	Availability of strategic planning documents, guidelines, and other supporting regulations.	Interview and documentation
		Available local resources	Availability of documents mapping the potential local resources in each target village to determine the most appropriate empowerment themes.	Interview and documentation
2	Input	Strategies used	Availability of strategic planning documents for the assisted village program.	Interview and documentation
		Work plan	Availability of work plan documents.	Documentation
		Budgeting	Availability of sustainable budgets.	Interview and documentation
3	Process	Monitoring and evaluation process	Implementation of scheduled monitoring and identification of	Interview and documentation

			existing obstacles.	
		Documentation	Availability of documentation for the implementation of the assisted village program.	Documentation
		Program	Availability of monitoring reports for the assisted village program.	Documentation
4	Product	Impact: Program reach and impact on the community	Reaching vulnerable communities in the target villages and providing positive economic impacts.	Interview and observation
		Sustainability: Program Sustainability	High community acceptance and expectations for the assisted village program.	Interview and observation
		Effectiveness: Effectiveness, efficiency, and significance of results	The program is implemented effectively and efficiently, producing significant outcomes.	Interview and observation
		Transferability: Program adaptability	The assisted village program can be applied in other locations with similar problem characteristics.	Interview and observation

Source: Stufflebeam's CIPP evaluation framework (processed data)

Collecting Data

Interview and observation procedures are used to acquire primary data, whereas documentation and literature are used to collect secondary data (Aziz et al., 2018). Interviews were conducted with informants from the university and external informants from the community. The list of informers can be found in the table:

Table 3. List of Informants for the Assisted Village Program

Category	Number of Informants	Position/Role	Village
Internal	Informant 1	Vice-Rector	

	Informant 2	Head of Planning and Finance Division	-
	Informant 3	Head of LPPM	
	Informant 4	Head of Assisted Village Program	
External	Informant 5	Neighborhood Leader	Bandungbaru
	Informant 6	Community Leader	
	Informant 7	Resident	
	Informant 8	Resident	
	Informant 9	Village Official	
	Informant 10	Local entrepreneurs	
	Informant 11	Religious leader	
	Informant 12	Neighborhood Leader	Wai Sari
	Informant 13	Community Leader	
	Informant 14	Resident	
	Informant 15	Resident	
	Informant 16	Village Official	
	Informant 17	Local entrepreneurs	
	Informant 18	Religious leader	
	Informant 19	Neighborhood Leader	Sumberrejo
	Informant 20	Community Leader	
	Informant 21	Resident	
	Informant 22	Resident	
	Informant 23	Village Official	
	Informant 24	Local entrepreneurs	
	Informant 25	Religious leader	

The interview method used is semi-structured. This method is considered the most suitable for this research as it allows the researcher to gather in-depth and flexible information while allowing respondents to explain their views and experiences in greater detail. The interview guide in a semi-structured interview serves as a framework that guides the researcher in asking questions but still provides room for further exploration based on the direction of the conversation as it unfolds (Barrick, 2020).

Inductive qualitative data analysis was used, which means qualitative research did not begin with theoretical deduction but rather with empirical facts. Researchers go out into the field to observe, evaluate, interpret, and form conclusions from what they see. Researchers are confronted with data gathered on the ground. Researchers must examine this data to uncover meaning, which then becomes the research's outcome (Siyoto, Sandu & Sodik, 2015). Data triangulation is used to enhance the reliability of research findings by integrating various primary and secondary data

sources. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the researched topic (Hussein, 2009).

Results and discussion

Context

A contextual analysis of the assisted village program implementation highlights a discrepancy between the university's program execution and the community's active involvement, as substantiated by the data confirmation table:

Table 4. Confirmation of context data aspects

Aspect	Summarize the Interview with an internal informant	Summarize the Interview with an external informant	Documentation
Context	The village development program has been implemented according to established procedures and in alignment with the program's vision. The process commenced with an initial survey, including the utilization of survey results conducted by community service students.	The university team came to conduct training programs on food processing and handicrafts. The community members simply participated in these programs. There was no effort to jointly formulate common goals with the community.	Documents regarding regulations, procedures, and program plans are available. However, documents related to the initial survey results and the mapping of community potentials and problems are missing.

Procedurally, the village development program has adhered to regulations, but the approach taken remains top-down. This is evident in the fact that the community has merely been beneficiaries without being involved in the goal setting and needs assessment phases. The lack of crucial documents such as the results of the initial survey and analysis of community potential indicates that the planning process has not been strongly evidence-based, potentially reducing the program's effectiveness.

UIN Raden Intan Lampung has the vision to become a leading university

in the development of integrative multidisciplinary Islamic studies with an environmental perspective (LPM UIN Raden Intan, 2020), therefore All activities, including the Assisted Village initiative, shall be carried out following the university's vision, However, so far, the Assisted Village program has only focused on fostering home industries by conducting training in food processing and handicraft making (Team Desa Binaan, 2024). This is certainly not in line with the vision of environmental awareness that should address environmental issues such as turning garbage into marketable goods, using animal manure as renewable energy, and other ecological preservation steps.

Guidelines-based community service must be built on the partnership principle, in which the institution and society are on equal footing (Susan et al., 2011). In the context of the partnership, the most important thing is for the community to actively participate in formulating common goals (Keith et al., 2007). The Assisted Village program has so far been seen as more of a top-down approach, with the university as the party that knows best and has more control, while the community only receives what is offered. Equality in the principle of university-community collaboration believes that community economic empowerment is a shared duty, with each party providing resources (Nichols et al., 2013). In community economic empowerment, the university contributes financial assets, expertise, and technology, while the community provides natural resources and social capital (Cooper et al., 2014). The benefits that can be acquired for the institution include advancing research and technology, while the community gains economic empowerment. The asset components of the University and the community can be empowered together, so the appropriate approach model is "asset-based community development", though the traditional "need-based community development" approach is still possible, particularly for immediate relief in crises faced by the community (Preece, 2017).

In determining the model for the Assisted Village program, mapping potential resources and issues becomes a very important factor, the success of mapping two crucial things, namely, challenges and prospective community resources, has a significant impact on the economic empowerment program's efficacy (McPherson et al., 2020). The problem mapping document must be able to map not only current problems but also potential future problems (risks), whereas the mapping document on

potential local resources, in addition to knowing the potential available resources, is also useful for raising awareness. a society that they have the potential to develop. The approach that must be employed in executing economic empowerment programs is based on the problem and potential mapping document (need-based or asset-based).

Input

The assisted village program has been designed within a strategic plan involving stakeholders, but the participation of village communities, as primary stakeholders, is suboptimal. The absence of the community in the strategic planning process reflects a less participatory approach, despite the program having regular budget support. The documentation of strategic planning and budgeting indicates an effort for sustainability, but the limited budget and the absence of a holistic long-term plan may hinder the effectiveness of the program and the overall achievement of the university's vision. This is evident on the table:

Table 5. Confirmation of input data aspects

Aspect	Summarize the Interview with an internal informant	Summarize the Interview with an external informant	Documentation
Input	The implementation of the assisted village program has been included in the strategic planning, which was developed through a process involving stakeholders. The program is also supported by sustainable funding through regular university financing.	The village community, as stakeholders, feels they were never involved in drafting the strategic plan. So far, their involvement has only been as participants in training sessions.	strategic planning documents for the program are available but do not yet include long-term plans that provide holistic support for achieving the university's vision. Budgeting documents for the program are available, but the allocated amount is minimal.

The financial framework for the economic empowerment program for the Assisted Village community uses a regular budget from the university but with a limited nominal amount (less than USD 2000 per program), so far the university's budget has been more focused on education and

research. On the contrary, based on its nominal quantity, it is insufficient, especially in light of the lack of any alternative funding sources. This, of course, makes achieving the goals of the community economic empowerment program, namely the creation of an independent society, extremely difficult.

Through collaboration with the government and the corporate/private sector, the possibility of securing alternative financing is rather open. Many government programs for poverty reduction, such as the Independent National Community Empowerment Program (PNPM), the Coastal Community Empowerment Program (PPMP), and the District Development Program, have not been fully explored, and existing cooperation with local governments has not been followed up concretely in a mutually beneficial relationship, So far, the government's role in the Village Development program has been very minimal.

The effectiveness of the Assisted Village Program is contingent on several measures, in addition to a sufficient financial framework. Policies are directions and instructions for carrying out operations to achieve goals determined by the leadership, both written and unwritten, outside of statutory restrictions and not in conflict with them (Agustina, 2019). The policy for the UIN Raden Intan supported the village's economic empowerment program and was written during strategic planning, but it is still general and cannot be used as practical guidance in program execution.

The division's strategic plan, in this example the Institute for Research and Community Service/Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian Masyarakat (LPPM), should include the university's strategic plan. The LPPM Strategic Plan outlines the organization's vision, goal, objectives, and methods for doing research and providing community service. The Strategic Plan is then translated into an Operational Plan. The operational plan is a short-term strategy that elucidates the strategic plan into a series of more specific and practical actions (Schmuck, 2022). The Operational Plan serves as a realistic reason for proposing a budget.

Process

The implementation of the assisted village program has generally been aligned with the goal of empowering the target village community.

However, the program's duration of only three days and its limited number of participants (30 people) indicates a very restricted scope, making it less effective in delivering significant empowerment impacts. Although monitoring and evaluation were reportedly conducted, the absence of documentation for monitoring and evaluation results reflects a lack of accountability and transparency in assessing the program's success. This issue could hinder efforts to achieve continuous improvement in the program. Data confirmation for the process aspect can be seen in the table:

Table 6. Confirmation of process data aspects

Aspect	Summarize the Interview with an internal informant	Summarize the Interview with an external informant	Documentation
Process	The assisted village program was implemented in accordance with its goal of empowering disadvantaged communities in the target village. Monitoring and evaluation were also conducted through visits during the program's implementation.	The community was only provided with a three-day training program for 30 participants.	Monitoring and evaluation reports for the program are unavailable.

The implementation of community services must follow a systematic process (de Witt, 2010). The process begins with LPPM forming The Assisted Village team, which is tasked with conducting a preliminary survey in the target village to determine the theme of empowerment. Based on the survey results, the team compiles a program proposal that includes a design and methods for implementing the program, as well as compiling the Term of Reference (TOR) as a basis for budget submissions. The community is participating as an object of the survey at this level of planning; community engagement has not been witnessed in setting shared goals or deciding program designs. Some projects did not function as planned and did not produce substantial effects due to a lack of community engagement during the program design stage.

The implementation stage of the economic empowerment program for the Assisted Village community takes place after all of the planning processes have been completed and the funding framework has been approved. According to the report on the results of the Assisted Village documents, implementation at the Assisted Village is still too limited, with only 3 days of implementation, with no follow-up plans.

The monitoring and evaluation stage is the final step. Monitoring and evaluation are inextricably linked tasks (Fred & Elizabeth, 2013). LPPM, in partnership with the Quality Assurance Agency/Lembaga Penjaminan Mutu (LPM), conducts monitoring and assessment. The Assisted Village Team monitored solely during the implementation stage, and even then, it did not generate a sufficient written document on the monitoring outcomes. All stages of an activity should be monitored, including the input stage (preparation and planning), the process stage (activity implementation), the output stage (activity results), and the outcome stage (outcome) (activity results function). They should all be in line with what has been planned and carried out as intended.

Evaluation is the process of measuring and assessing a project's implementation. Measuring and assessing are two different things. Measuring compares implementation results to preset metrics and indicators, whereas assessing compares results to a set of criteria (Basarab & Root, 2012). The goal of the Economic Empowerment Program for the Community in the Assisted Village review was to see if the program's results and impacts on the community's economy were relevant to the empowerment goals. It is impossible to know with certainty whether the training program had a beneficial impact on the community economy because the community service center did not conduct a program impact evaluation on the training program that was implemented, as evidenced by the lack of evaluation findings documentation.

Product

The village mentoring program has made a positive contribution to improving community welfare; however, its impact tends to be short-term due to the lack of follow-up actions such as post-training mentoring. Insufficient attention to the village's local potential, such as agricultural, livestock, and plantation products, indicates that the program has not fully

aligned with the community's needs and strengths. This mismatch has resulted in university-provided tools being unused. The program's approach, which lacks adaptability to local potential, risks hindering the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of the empowerment efforts. The following table further illustrates this phenomenon:

Table 7. Confirmation of product data aspects

Aspect	Summarize the Interview with an internal informant	Summarize the Interview with an external informant	Observation
Product	The program has had a positive impact on improving community welfare and will continue to be implemented to reach other villages in Lampung Province.	The program conducted by the university ends without any follow-up actions, such as post-training mentoring.	The village has high potential agricultural, livestock, and plantation resources that remain untapped due to a lack of attention from the university. This has led to university-provided tools being unused as they do not align with the village's local potentials.

Economic empowerment is aimed at those who are socially and economically disempowered (Khairani et al., 2021). As a result, the empowerment program's success is largely dependent on the effectiveness of identifying the less empowered group (Cohen, 1994). Even if the aim agrees with the target, the evaluation reveals that the objective is sufficiently appropriate to reach mothers and women who need more income. However, the reach is still regarded as insufficient to offer meaningful outcomes. Since the topic of empowering women, today is a central issue, justice of rights and gender equality are a demand, while women in reality still face a lot of discrimination (Tripathi, 2013), the Assisted Village economic empowerment program focuses on mothers and women as a means of increasing gender equality and justice. Even though the empowerment goal was reasonable, the training reach (just 30 participants) was deemed insufficient to yield meaningful outcomes.

In terms of economic impact, the Assisted Village Program has not

demonstrated the significance of the results; efforts begun by the community as a result of the training have not been sustained due to a variety of factors, including marketing constraints, production costs that do not match the selling price, and inefficient technology. The program's minimal impact is also due to the failure to implement programs based on the principle of sustainability; programs that have been implemented simply end without being followed up on, even though the community in the target village has a high need for empowerment, acceptance, and expectations.

The major goal of community economic empowerment is for individuals to be able to fulfill their requirements (Farida & Qabandiya, 2022); the community's ability will rise if people can access productive sources that allow them to raise their income and purchase the products and services they require resources (Shaffer, 1990). Local sources of income are those that are reasonably easy for the community to access. The economic empowerment program launched through the Assisted Village program has not fully used the potential of local resources. Moreover, training programs also have not been maintained by the community as well as the abandoned supplied equipment tools. The university's donated screen-printing equipment has not been used since it does not fit the recipients' requirements. This draws attention to a lack of needs analysis before the program started, which led to equipment being useless for the local economic situation, potential, or interests. As a result, the receivers find it difficult to make good use of the equipment productively, therefore wasting resources. Comprehensive needs evaluations, community involvement in planning, and guarantees that the help given supports the economic activity the community values will help to avoid such problems.

Ukhuwah Principles Practices to Community Empowerment Program

Based on the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) evaluation of the Assisted Village program, several weaknesses have been identified that could hinder the achievement of its objectives. In the aspect of Context, there is a mismatch between the program's objectives and the community's needs, resulting in an inappropriate focus on the program. Input weaknesses occur due to inadequate resources, such as funds and manpower, or insufficient planning. On the Process side, program

implementation can be disrupted by poor coordination, inadequate monitoring, or unrealistic scheduling. Lastly, in the Product, the program's results have less significant impact or are not relevant to the needs of the community. To address this weakness, a framework that is more aligned with the characteristics of Islamic higher education institutions is needed.

Islamic universities must not only provide higher education but also promote Islamic ideals as the foundation for carrying out Tridharma obligations (Education, learning, and community service). Ukhuwwah is a notion in Islam that is relevant to the work of community service. Ukhuwwah, in terms of terminology, means brotherhood, derived from the root word "akhā" which generally means paying attention (Shihab, 2013). In Islamic teachings, the concept of Ukhuwwah is divided into four types, namely: (1) Ukhuwwah 'Ubudiyah (Brotherhood among creatures who submit to Allah SWT), (2) Ukhuwwah Islamiyah (Brotherhood among Muslims), (3) Ukhuwwah Wathaniyah (Brotherhood among a nation and country), and (4) Ukhuwwah Basyariyah (Brotherhood among humanity) (Shihab, 2011). The concept of Ukhuwwah consists of the following principles: Ta'aruf, Tafahum, Ta'awun, and Takaful (Suriati et al., 2020). The principle of Ta'aruf is mutual acquaintance both physically and mentally. The Ta'aruf Assisted Village program is the initial step for UIN Raden Intan as an empowering actor to get to know the community both physically through direct observation of the village community's environment such as housing conditions, employment, and education, and mentally by understanding the social system, customs, and culture that prevail within the community. Getting to know each other, will open up opportunities to share knowledge and experiences (Shihab, 2017), and foster sensitivity towards the issues that arise, especially the socio-economic problems of rural communities. The process of understanding the community must then produce a document mapping the potential problems and needs of the village community, followed by formulating common goals to reduce the gap between the expected objectives and the community's needs that have been present all along.

The principle of Tafahum is a mutual understanding of conditions to encourage cooperation and reduce misunderstandings (Rofiqi & Haq, 2022). After getting to know the community and the accompanying problems, each party understands the need for economic empowerment for UIN Raden Intan and the community. For UIN Raden Intan,

economic empowerment is a means of developing science and technology, while economic empowerment is needed to improve welfare for the community. Therefore, formulating common goals based on the principle of university-community partnership becomes a key factor in this principle of mutual understanding. Partnership is a form of association between two or more parties that forms a cooperative bond based on agreement and mutual need to enhance capacity and capability in a specific endeavor or goal, thereby achieving better results (Raharjo Weda, 2018). Thus, although the university acts as an empowering actor and the community as the object of empowerment, with the partnership paradigm, there are no superior or inferior parties, which aligns with the empowerment process itself which is a collective action to enhance shared capacity.

The principle of Ta'awun, or mutual assistance taught in Islam, is helping each other in goodness and piety. Ta'awun encourages reciprocal cooperation and enhances community development and social cohesion by creating synergy for sustainable growth and an integrated approach to common goals in society (Mhd Sarif & Ismail, 2022). Ta'awun's guiding concept is used in the Assisted Village Program to propel the village community toward social and economic independence. Ta'awun is implemented in this program given the different support given to the community, especially through training courses targeted at home industry or home-based businesses. Training in many disciplines is part of this curriculum, including handicrafts using locally grown raw materials and processing of regional specialty foods with great market value. This strategy not only teaches new skills but also gives the community chances to grow enterprises depending on special local potential. Furthermore, this Assisted Village program offers the tools required to launch or grow small businesses, therefore enabling program members to instantly apply gained skills and raise their production capacity. Since the community no longer has to commit significant funds to buy manufacturing equipment, this equipment support is quite vital to support business survival.

Realizing the sustainability of the economic empowerment program inside the Assisted Village program depends mostly on the Takaful concept—that of mutual guarantee or assurance (Billah et al., 2019). The success and sustainability of this initiative depend much on the combined dedication of all the engaged parties. In this instance, UIN Raden Intan actively helps to guarantee program sustainability using ongoing mentoring. The Village

Development program thus appears to be simply a one-time initiative hence accompanying programs including technical supervision, administrative support, as well as monitoring and evaluation of the business development conducted by the community are necessary to increase their efficacy. On the other side, the community also significantly contributes to guaranteeing the program's survival. Whether in labor, raw materials, or unique traditional knowledge, they can help by offering local resources. The community's will to progress their hamlet, and the spirit of cooperation become great assets to guarantee this program can run for a long time. The cooperation between UIN Raden Intan and the local community in advancing the Takaful concept fosters a close link whereby both sides support and maintain each other.

Community empowerment by Islamic universities as practices of the principles of Ukhuwwah can be illustrated in the image:

Figure 2. Ukhuwwah practices in the community empowerment program

Ta'aruf
- How university and community get to know each other
- Mapping the potential resources, problems and needs of the community as a result, then using the results to determine the community service model: Need-Based or Asset-Based

Tafahum
- How university and community understand each other
- Implementation of partnership paradigm in community service

Ta'awun
- How university and community help each other
- Universities need community for the development of science an technology, and community needs universities for the improvement of their well-being

Takaful
- How university and community support each other
- The University contributes experts, while the community provides resources in community service

A self-sufficient and prosperous community

Today universities are not only required to develop academics but also to have social responsibility for community problems in the form of community service ((UNIBILITY) et al., 2017). The concept of University

Social Responsibility (USR) is a higher education response to community social and economic problems, with a focus on fostering, developing, and empowering community capacity so that people can be self-sufficient by utilizing existing local resources (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). USR is a policy of ethical quality from the performance of the university's academic community (students, faculty, and administrative staff. employees) through management that is responsible for the education, cognitive, labor, and environmental impacts generated by the university, in the interactive dialogue with the community (Lo et al., 2017). USR distinguishes four types of university impacts: organizational impacts that affect the university and community environment, including students, staff, and academics; educational impacts that relate to educating people and shaping ethics and values; and cognitive impacts that relate to building and producing knowledge, consolidating the relationships between the technological and social contexts of science and society. These four impacts enable Vallaeys to outline four areas of socially responsible university management, as shown in the image below (Bokhari, 2019):

Figure 3. Four areas of social responsibility management at the university
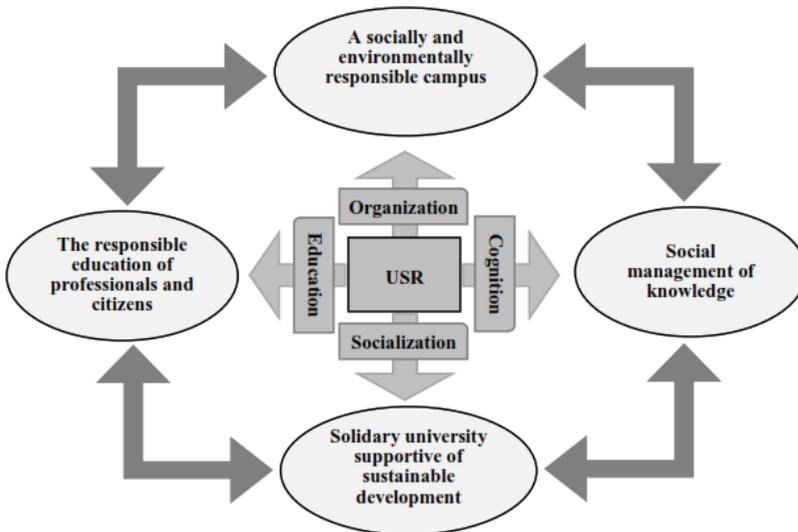

The concept of USR emerged due to the awareness that the level of trust and community engagement greatly influences the existence of higher

education institutions (Sengupta et al., 2020). Therefore, higher education institutions are not only obligated to produce graduates but must also have a high social concern for community issues in the form of community service (Albulescu & Albulescu, 2014). Referring to the practices of Ukhuwwah principles and their relevance to the USR concept, the framework for the community empowerment program can be proposed as follows:

Figure 4. A framework for community empowerment program
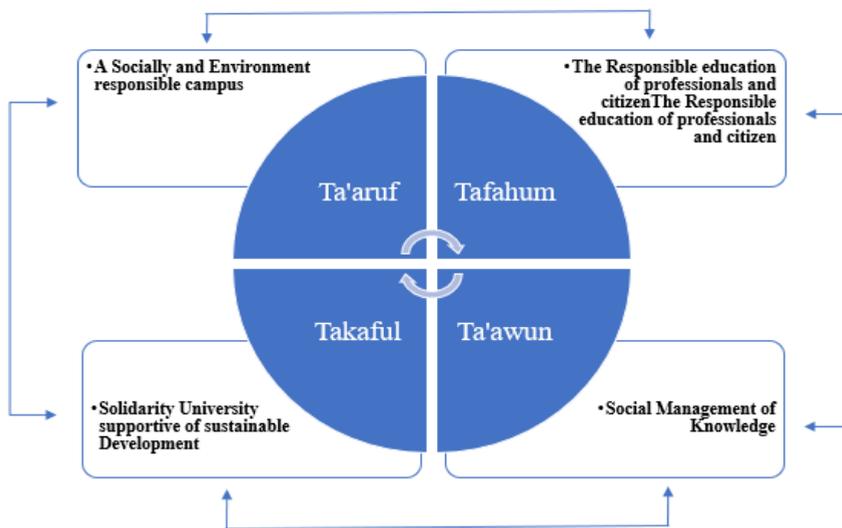
The framework of the community empowerment program outlined in the image illustrates systematic stages starting with fostering community awareness of self-potential through the principle of Ta'aruf (mutual acquaintance), which aims to open their understanding of the strengths and resources they possess. The next stage is the enhancement of knowledge and skills through the principle of Tafahum (mutual understanding), intending to increase the capacity of human resources (HR) within the community. After that, the implementation stage using the principle of Ta'awun (mutual assistance) focuses on the community's ability to produce and apply skills practically. The final process is mentoring based on the principle of Takaful (mutual guarantee), which ensures that community efforts can run sustainably and independently.

The entire framework emphasizes collaboration, awareness, and sustainability as the main pillars of achieving community independence.

Conclusion

The implementation of Ukhuwah principles in community empowerment not only increases program effectiveness but also strengthens the relationship between universities and the community. In line with Islamic values that uphold brotherhood and care for others, Ukhuwwah serves as a solid foundation for sincere collaboration between academics and the community. By fostering a sense of brotherhood, mutual respect, and working together as one unit, the community will be more motivated and open. This will build trust, promote inclusivity, and improve the community's quality of life. Ukhuwwah, as a manifestation of faith, becomes a bridge connecting the academic world with the real world, creating a broader and more sustainable social impact.

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