



Executive
Summary

Until we are all equal

A photograph of a woman with reddish hair holding a young girl in a pink shirt, who is hugging another woman with long brown hair. They are outdoors, possibly at a fair or festival, with colorful structures in the background.

Sexual & Reproductive

Health and Rights in Romania

Current Status and Future Trajectories

2024

Executive Summary

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in Romania have undergone a number of evolutions since the fall of the communist regime in 1989. In the emerging democracy in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Romania witnessed significant progress in the realm of SRHR, with various influential international entities such as UN Agencies, the Global Fund, USAID, UNFPA, and the US Peace Corps actively involved in improving access to sexual and reproductive health services and commodities. This funding continued steadily until shortly after Romania entered the European Union in 2007, and the country was no longer eligible for overseas development assistance, and EU funds were re-directed to other development priorities. During this period, there was consistent comprehensive sex education in schools, access to family planning services and abortion services.

In the last 10 years however, not only has funding been more scarce, but services which were previously accessible through public funding have been reduced, though the rights to these services still exist in both EU and national law and regulations. The involvement of the Romanian state in SRHR has decreased significantly, forcing community supported organizations and non-governmental organizations to step up and fill the social and political roles needed in improving SRHR for the populations in Romania. While legislative frameworks protect SRHR and access to services, the reality reveals structural gaps in the provision of these services. Romanian civil society organizations working in SRHR have been tracking this reduction in services and the related consequences with great difficulty, due to a lack of publicly available information and investment in SRHR research.

Due to the lack of available information and the need to highlight gaps in implementation, qualitative research on SRHR was commissioned by Plan International Romania in collaboration with Altamont Group. Twenty-two key informant interviews and focus groups of Romanian civil society and public sector

stakeholders were conducted in person and online in January 2024. These discussions along with literature analysis and stakeholder consultations produced the following findings:

- **Access to SRHR** services and information has decreased in Romania as a result of current government policies: There is limited knowledge and understanding of SRHR particularly in reference to abortion.
- **Despite abortion being legal**, many doctors refuse to perform it in public clinics and will also not provide referrals as they are required by law to do. Sometimes this is for genuine religious beliefs, but there are many examples of doctors citing religious reasons as a pretext, but then offering to perform the abortion in a private clinic for a fee.
- **There is a lack of a coherent strategic plan** to prevent and eradicate the transmission of HIV/AIDS, evidenced by the low rate of HIV testing, a lack of data, and insufficient budget allocation at the Ministry of Health for prevention and treatment strategies.

Limited comprehensive sexual education is contributing to high rates of teenage pregnancies:

- There is currently little to no comprehensive sexual education being given to youth in Romanian public schools, despite past achievements in this area
- Inadequate sexual health education contributes to high rates of teenage pregnancies (around 35–40 births per 1,000 were from women 15-19 years old, which is twice the European average, UNICEF, 2021) and limited awareness of reproductive rights and contraceptive options among young people.

- Youth receive most of their information about sex from their families, social media, the internet, and peers.
- Misinformation and mythology about sex is rampant in Romanian youth culture due to the outsized influence of social media and pornography readily available on the internet.
- Parents are reluctant to speak to their children about sexual and reproductive health issues.

There are structural and societal challenges in the Romanian healthcare system which further impede access to SRHR: SRHR in Romania is further hampered by conservative attitudes, bureaucratic hurdles, and a underfunded healthcare system, hindering access to contraception and abortion care, as well as holistic reproductive health, including prenatal, intranatal and postnatal care.

- Financial constraints make accessing reproductive healthcare, including abortion care, prohibitively expensive for many individuals, exacerbating socio-economic disparities.
- Societal stigma in healthcare impact women's access to reproductive services, with male doctors often lacking understanding, and a shortage of female doctors further complicating care, particularly for sensitive issues.
- Inadequate prenatal and postpartum support, and the medicalization of childbirth and lack of respectful maternity care highlight the need for comprehensive reforms to improve healthcare worker education and their provision of patient-centered care.

Marginalized populations in Romania face additional barriers in accessing SRHR services:

- There is significant SRHR discrimination and marginalization of groups such as refugees, Roma, LGBTQIA+, rural populations, and persons with disabilities.
- This is especially relevant to healthcare, where access to services and active discrimination within healthcare services are significant.
- Marginalized populations also experience sexual and gender-based violence at higher rates.
- Little is known about persons with disabilities

and SRHR discrimination, which itself speaks to the marginalization of this population group.

- While CSOs and NGOs in Romania do provide services for marginalized populations, many do not have specific programming. When programming is geared for the whole population, it may not be enough to combat significant and systemic discrimination of vulnerable groups.

Challenges accessing SRHR are symptomatic of increasingly conservative gender norms within Romanian society:

- Gender-based violence and discrimination is pervasive and nurtured by a socio-cultural mentality of 'blaming the victim' that also has ramifications in the legal justice system.
- There is entrenched gender discrimination, evidenced by socio-economic disparities, cultural norms, and systemic barriers that disproportionately affect women, including teenage mothers and marginalized communities.
- High rates of teenage pregnancy reflect broader societal hurdles and limited access to comprehensive sexual education and reproductive healthcare services, perpetuating cycles of poverty.
- Gender normative beliefs around the traditional role of women in society, particularly within and towards communities such as the Roma, play a part in restricting women's autonomy and ability to make choices outside of traditional expectations.
- Advocacy groups and legal reforms play crucial roles in challenging discriminatory ideologies, promoting awareness, and advocating for inclusive policies and support mechanisms to address gender-based discrimination and ensure the realization of reproductive rights for all individuals in Romania.
- SRHR organizations describe the prevalence of traditional views on issues such as contraception, abortion, and gender roles within the family and society, as stemming from influence of religious institutions. This influence extends to political advocacy, where it makes use of external funding to shape legislation and public policies according to its own values. This can be a challenge, but also an opportunity to collaborate with religious organizations to affect change.

Recommendations

In light of the above challenges, the following recommendations, developed alongside Romanian civil society organizations, are proposed to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights in Romania:

- The Romanian Government should ensure the full realization of SRHR in line with Romanian law and EU standards, including as it relates to appropriate healthcare and abortion access.

- Free access to contraception should be provided, especially to marginalised groups, to prevent high rates of unwanted pregnancies including among adolescent girls.

- Respectful maternal care, including pre, intra and post-natal, should be improved, including education and training reforms to provide comprehensive, respectful and patient-centered care

- Guidelines should be developed and training should be provided to healthcare workers on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including as it relates to survivor-centred GBV care and the clinical management of rape.

- Romanian education authorities should implement the teaching of comprehensive sexual education (CSE), respectful relationships and the prevention of gender-based violence from a young age as standard elements of the school curriculum. CSE needs to be seen as an integral component to prevention of unwanted pregnancies, abortions and reduction of sexually transmitted diseases. Comprehensive sexual education classes are an opportunity to also provide adolescents with information on how to protect themselves from risks of sexual exploitation and abuse both online and in person.

- Comprehensive sexual education should also address sexual orientation and gender identity, to enable LGBTQIA+ students to learn important sexual health information to stay healthy, but to also promote inclusion and respectful conversations as well on gender equality, gender identity and sexual orientation.

- Projects that focus specifically on marginalized populations should be initiated and supported. An equity-based and social justice approach is needed to work specifically with marginalized groups to address systemic inequalities

- A data collection strategy is needed to ensure the centralized collection, collation, dissemination, collaboration, and application of data related to SRHR in Romania.

- The Romanian Government, SRHR service providers and civil society should work together to increase the dissemination of factual SRHR information, to ensure the Romanian public has easy access to fact-based and rights-based information. This should include free and confidential online, telephone, social media and in-person access to SRHR information. Online information portals should be available targeting both young people as well as information for parents on how to talk to their children about sexual and reproductive health and rights.



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About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

Since March 2022, we've worked in Romania to deliver immediate humanitarian aid to children and their families affected by the conflict in Ukraine.

We collaborate with Romanian civil society organisations who provide support to refugees from Ukraine, including schooling for children from Ukraine, and youth centres for Romanian and Ukrainian young people. Our projects with our partners cover the length and breadth of Romania, delivering services to those in need of support.

Beyond the direct life-saving humanitarian support we provide, we are partnering with local organisations to support children's rights and equality for girls in Romania.

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