



REPORT

Hearing on 'Roma Inclusion: Exploring the gender dimension'

Brussels, 21 October 2015

Introduction

The hearing was opened by Akos Topolansky (EESC, president of the working group on Roma Inclusion), Heather Roy (Eurodiaconia, Secretary General) and Ivan Ivanov (ERIO, Executive Director). The speakers emphasised the particular challenges Roma women and girls face when it comes to accessing education, employment, health and housing, and making their voices heard in the political arena.

They explained the need to increase awareness amongst local authority and civil society actors of the gender dimension of Roma inclusion and promote mutual learning; furthermore, they called on the European institutions to promote an equal playing field for Romani men and women by strengthening the gender aspect of its Framework on the NRIS.

Session 1: State of play

The aim of this session was to summarise key initiatives taken at EU level to promote the inclusion of Roma women and girls, and to critically assess policy impact on a national and local level by looking specifically at the current situation of Roma women and children in different Member States.

Lavinia Banu, European Commission DG Justice

In 2011, the European Commission adopted the EU framework on National Roma Integration Strategies, encouraging Member States to develop policies which improve Roma access to healthcare, housing, education and employment. The EU framework didn't incorporate a gender dimension; however, in 2013, Member States unanimously adopted a Council Recommendation on effective tools for Roma integration which specifically refers to the situation of Roma women and children. Article 2.5 of the Recommendation highlights three key aspects of the fight against violence and discrimination against Roma women: 1) cross-national cooperation between Member States; 2) stakeholder dialogue with public authorities, civil society actors and Roma communities; 3) enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation. For example, the Commission recently launched infringement proceedings against the Czech Republic and Slovakia to end the educational segregation of Roma children in these countries; furthermore, the Commission is currently supporting Member States in setting up National Platforms to bring together national stakeholders in the field of Roma Inclusion. The Commission has also recently launched a call for tenders on capacity building and shadow reporting, aimed at training (pro-)Roma NGOs across Europe on effective NRIS monitoring and accessing EU funding. The Commission has put the necessary policy measures and financial tools in place to enable tangible progress in the area of Roma Inclusion, which includes the empowerment of Roma women and girls – it is now focusing on ensuring local implementation and impact.





Robert Rustem, European Roma and Travellers Forum

The ERTF is an umbrella organisation of over 1500 local and regional Roma NGOs, and as such constitutes the most representative Roma organisation in Europe. It uniquely features Romani as an official working language and has a cooperation agreement with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). The ERTF has been actively promoting awareness of the vulnerable position of Roma women and girls through reports on the gender dimension of the NRIS and early marriages within the Roma community. Whilst many countries acknowledge that Roma women face particular challenges with regards to social inclusion, few of them have incorporated a gender dimension into their NRIS, leaving the issue unsolved. However, the absence of a gender perspective in the NRIS is not the only challenge; national governments don't seem to feel responsible for the inferior status of Roma women in many areas of life, justifying their policy of non-interference by pointing at the 'patriarchal' nature of Roma culture.

Roma women are particularly vulnerable because they face discrimination on multiple levels; they share the double burden of belonging to a marginalised ethnic community and a socioeconomically disadvantaged gender. Furthermore, the tradition of early (potentially forced) marriages increases their risk of experiencing poverty, social exclusion and gender-based violence, and undermines the development of skills. The policy response is inadequate – the EU Framework on NRIS doesn't require Member States to mainstream gender into their Roma inclusion policies and doesn't monitor gender in its yearly NRIS assessments. Currently, 87% of NRIS don't incorporate a gender analysis and 35% of Member States only mention gender a few times in their strategies at all. As a concrete step forward, Robert emphasised that the European Commission should include a gender category in its EU Framework, and that national governments should stop treating the marginal position of Roma women and girls as an unavoidable and integral aspect of Roma culture.

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Krisztina Nagy, Reformed Church of Hungary

Based on her experiences at the RCH Roma Mission, Krisztina has always viewed Roma women as strong people. They hold the family together – they are not only responsible for the children and their education, but also act as bridges between their community and society at large. As the same time, they are vulnerable - not only because they are women, but also because they belong to an at-risk minority population. Roma women give birth relatively early. In Hungary, one third of Roma women will give birth to their first child under the age of 18 and two thirds will have their first child by the time they reach the age of 20. Giving birth early means that many Roma women never get to finish their education and struggle to find employment. The percentage of employed Roma women is quite low at just 16.3% -- this is even lower than the already small percentage of employed Roma men (29.2%).

We don't have representative statistics on the Roma population at large, and we have even less information on Roma women specifically. Their situation differs from area to area, from village to city, and there are many factors that have an effect on their lifestyle: cultural background, family situation, education level, etc. Whilst the general population often only sees Roma women as being oppressed, the true situation is much more complex than that. On the basis of three concrete life stories, Krisztina illustrated that Roma women's chances for societal participation can diverge significantly – as such, efforts to empower Roma women should not focus solely on their Roma background, but also on their unique living environments and on the specific opportunities and stumbling blocks these provide for personal development.

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Sheena Keller, Fundamental Rights Agency

The Fundamental Rights agency is a decentralised agency of the EU, focusing on the thematic issue of fundamental rights. It provides evidence-based advice to European institutions and Member States on issues



related to fundamental rights when implementing EU law; it focuses on research and data collection which support informed policy-making. In 2011, recognising a lack of reliable data on Roma in general and Roma women in particular, the FRA was tasked with providing statistical data on the situation of Roma in the EU. The FRA conducted a randomised household survey on the situation of Roma in 11 Member States, interviewing Roma and their non-Roma neighbourhoods in high-density areas. The survey results allow for a comparison between the situation of Roma and non-Roma and between Roma men and Roma women. The data show a large gap in literacy rates not only between Roma and non-Roma, but also between Roma men and women. Similar differences can be observed regarding school attendance and continued education after the age of 16. The observable gender gap in the field of education is likely connected to early marriages. Tellingly, literacy rates amongst younger Roma women (below age 24) are higher than those amongst older Roma women. With regards to employment, the gender gap is very large; Roma women face higher barriers to employment, have comparatively lower qualifications, and are often expected to focus on their households. Additionally, living in segregated areas makes access to the labour market more difficult. In former socialist countries where men and women traditionally shared work more equally, the gender gap is smaller than in countries like Spain and Portugal. Awareness of anti-discrimination legislation is also lower amongst Roma women than Roma men. With regards to healthcare, the gender gap is less significant, but there exists a huge gap between Roma and non-Roma women (with many Roma women having no basic medical insurance). Furthermore, 42% of Roma live in severe deprivation, compared to 12% of non-Roma. Finding reliable statistics on the situation of Roma across Europe is difficult, although these data are very important for authorities to help shape their NRIS; we therefore need more disaggregated gender-based data to inform our engagement with Roma.

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Discussion

Lavinia Banu, EC: Whilst the EU Framework on NRIS doesn't have a clear gender dimension, it is important not to lose sight of initiatives which have been developed since and which complement the Framework, such as the 2013 Council Recommendation. Furthermore, the Commission does not solely address Roma inclusion through the 2011 Framework, but also uses tools such as the European Semester (for example, in 2015, the Commission proposed CSRs on education to various Member States) and anti-discrimination legislation.

Sheena Keller, FRA: Although we are seeing an improvement in the literacy rates of young Roma, we're unsure how to explain it. There have been promising initiatives in the field of education, including ESF projects, focusing on early childhood learning and primary school programmes. Drop-out rates have decreased, though they are still very high.

Robert Rustem, ERTF: The term 'Roma migrants' has problematic connotations, as they are often EU citizens looking for better living conditions in other countries – this doesn't set them apart from other EU mobile citizens. It is their right to rely on social security whilst they settle down in their new environment and look for employment. Regarding education, we are witnessing an increase of Roma children in schools, but we should also work towards better opportunities on the labour market (and not just within Roma organisations) once they have finished school education by tackling discrimination. Another important objective for (pro)Roma NGOs is to focus more on ensuring that successful projects are translated into impactful policies.

Ivan Ivanov, ERIO: Local authorities tend to focus on social inclusion because there are more financial resources available for this – but such measures cannot be truly effective when they don't simultaneously tackle anti-Gypsyism. Promoting social inclusion and tackling discrimination are two sides of one coin.



Session 2: Positive practices

The aim of this session was to look at some promising, geographically transferable projects of civil society organisations, which focus specifically on empowering Roma women and improving their chances for social inclusion and political participation.

Anca Enache, Helsinki Deaconess Institute

The Helsinki Deaconess Institute has been operating a community drop-in centre in Helsinki for the last 6 years, focused on providing support to vulnerable migrants. Roma migrants are an important target group; particularly those from Eastern Europe often face poverty and social exclusion, and struggle to make their voices heard in society. The centre is implementing a range of initiatives aimed at empowering Roma women. It has recently developed a project promoting grassroots democratic participation by Roma women: the aim is to allow Roma women and girls to acquire the necessary skills to access services and to make them aware of their rights as citizens. The centre also raises Roma women's awareness on gender equality and domestic violence, and advocates for improved health services for Roma children and pregnant women. Furthermore, it uses art and media channels to make Roma voices heard and to tackle negative stereotypes. As such, the centre combines training and support activities with advocacy and public anti-discrimination campaigns. Attempts to eradicate homelessness amongst migrant Roma women and to improve their access to the labour market have faced significant hurdles, as the political will to address their situation is limited; however, trainings focused on improving informal skills (related to crafting, for example) have proven quite successful. Roma women are actively involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the centre's activities. On an advocacy level, the centre supports their mobilisation, rather than relying on activists who represent them.

Marta Pinto, European Roma Information Office

The KeyRoma project (2012-2014) was a three-year project co-initiated by the European Roma Information Office and financed by the European Commission's Life Long Learning Programme. Implemented in five different countries (Spain, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, Belgium), its aim was to boost the socio-economic integration of Roma women through adult education, to increase their chances on the labour market (particularly the service sector), and to promote the women's active citizenship and personal fulfilment through encouragement and training. In each country, interviews were conducted with employers in the service sector and with Roma women in order to inventise vocational competencies and learning needs. On this basis, local learning groups were created. The key output of the KeyRoma project is a learning module consisting of four core units (attitudes, skills, knowledge, mediation and information), which highlight different aspects of (and prerequisites for) successful labour market participation. The module is available in seven different languages and freely accessible online.¹

To access the presentation, please click [here](#).

Ana Contreras, Drom Kotar Mestipen

The Roma Association of Women *Drom Kotar Mestipen* ("A path for freedom") was created in 1999, aimed at promoting gender equality within the Roma community by tackling stereotypes about (and discrimination towards) Roma women, promoting equal access to education and the labour market, and partnering with other equality organisations and networks. DKM is engaged in various activities to empower Roma women. For example, it has introduced 'Romani Women Students meetings', providing a platform for exchange of personal experiences regarding access to education and the labour market, and for joint reflection on potential solutions. These meetings link girls and women of all generations and allow them to play an active role in the coordination process; they also promote positive role models. Another initiative is a course aimed at training Roma women to become school canteen monitors, which provides them with an official qualification recognized by the

¹ <http://www.erionet.eu/keyroma>



Catalan government. It is aimed at promoting the presence of Roma women in public spaces such as schools and to strengthen their voice within the educational sector; priority is given to women who are unemployed and have very limited chances of accessing the labour market through other means. In addition, DKM advocates for equal rights for Roma women at local, national and European level.

To access the presentation, please click [here](#).

Discussion

Robert Rustem, ERTF: The ERTF has recently co-initiated a pilot project called 'Making Roma women's voice and votes count' in Finland, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania. Aimed at improving political participation, it recruits Roma women interested in being trained on political subjects, and holds bilateral meetings with political parties to see if they would be interested in having Roma women as electoral candidates. Additionally, it provides information on the right to vote and on monitoring national elections.

Michele van Burik, Roma Mediator (NL): We need better structures to combat Anti-Gypsyism. In the Netherlands, Roma women are generally only allowed to work as volunteers. Regardless of their education level, accessing the labour market remains very difficult – closing the gap between education and employment is a core challenge. Statelessness is also an important issue we need to focus more on; some Roma have been living in the Netherlands for 30 or 40 years and cannot apply for Dutch citizenship, often passing this problem on to future generations.

Marta Pinto, ERIO: Regarding the longer-term impact of KeyRoma, many motivated participants continued to be motivated after the project had come to an end and eventually found a job. However, we are more concerned about those lacking an 'inner drive' to learn. In Belgium, our learning group consisted of 7 Roma women. Out of these, three started with language courses as language can constitute a main barrier to finding employment alongside discrimination. An added difficulty was that many affordable courses are only offered during the evening and the weekends and potentially clash with family obligations. As the leader of the learning group observed, self-motivation is an integral condition for success of the project.

Session 3: Next steps

The aim of this session was to reflect, on the basis of the information shared at the previous sessions, on the roles of various key actors (EU institutions, civil society organisations, local authorities) in ensuring the social inclusion of Roma women in a sustainable and participatory way.

Damian Draghici, Member of the European Parliament

As a Romanian MEP with a Roma background, Damian Draghici experienced anti-Roma discrimination from an early age, which he describes as a structural obstacle to social inclusion. However, in his opinion, members of the Roma community frequently underestimate the importance of education for Roma girls, defining their responsibilities in terms of marriage and taking care of the household. In order to break the circle of disadvantage, we should also engage with the Roma community at the level of families and individual households. Roma women possess a wide range of informal skills and can flourish in many occupations; therefore, at EU level, it is important to focus educational efforts within the NRIS more specifically on Roma women and girls in order to draw out this potential, and to prevent them from remaining trapped in a vicious cycle through begging. It is also important to better inform Roma women about their rights in order to increase their self-esteem and to tackle domestic violence, which is a major problem.

Damian Draghici is currently involved in two concrete initiatives: in November 2015, he will organise a conference on 'Roma Youth Empowerment', which focuses on success stories of Roma students and demonstrates that the obstacles which Roma face when it comes to accessing education are not insurmountable. Furthermore, in collaboration with a researcher from MIT, he is currently developing a tablet



PC for Roma children; this tablet will contain a single game aimed at stimulating their curiosity to learn and at boosting their confidence.

Stanka Jankovic, Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation

As a project coordinator working on Roma inclusion in Serbia, Stanka Jankovic has observed that existing legislation and policies on Roma inclusion, which sound promising on paper, are often not being respected at a local level. In order to achieve sustainable change for Roma women and girls, civil society actors need to address their situation at a variety of levels, and combine anti-discrimination measures with empowerment. We need to engage with girls, helping them to identify their skills and talents. We need to engage with their families, working with key family members to make them realise the importance of formal education for men and women alike, and to reinforce the notion that they can change their fate. We need to inform them about their rights, but they are responsible for defining their priorities – for Roma women, in particular, this means finding a balance between employment opportunities and family life. We need to work with local communities, sensitising them to cultural differences and taking away their fear by tackling prejudices. We need to work with institutions to improve access to services, and with national and EU-level policy makers. To improve conditions for Roma women, the dominant mindset needs to be changed both within the Roma community and general society; we should particularly aim to close the gap between education and employment, and to improve the space for Roma participation in shaping the inclusion process at all levels.

Denise Wright, Eurocities Taskforce on Roma Inclusion

As a Race Relations Coordinator for the South Belfast Roundtable, which brings together a variety of local actors to challenge racism and promote diversity, Denise Wright has worked with Romanian Roma in Belfast since they first arrived in 2007. Due to immigration restrictions, they could only work in a self-employed capacity, had no access to public funds and could only receive emergency health care, resided in very poor housing, and received no financial support when sending their children to school. Roma women faced a particularly marginal position, requiring support to be able to even begin the integration process. Therefore, a pilot project with Roma women was initiated with one-to-one support in order to build confidence and increase language and vocational skills. Based on this experience, Denise Wright shared a number of recommendations to local authorities regarding the empowerment of Roma women.

Firstly, it is important that projects and services don't focus solely on the women themselves, but engage with the wider family, to meet the needs of the children whilst their mothers engage in project activities, and to decrease the resistance of husbands to a time-consuming initiative without directly apparent benefits. Secondly, it is very important to recognise the long tradition of fear of engaging with 'outsiders' and build trust by investing into 'bridge builders' coming from within the Roma community, and by fostering structural and long-term dialogue to ensure long-term support. Thirdly, a culturally sensitive approach is required, which entails recognising that we know almost nothing about social and cultural norms of the Roma community, and recognising the richness of Roma history and culture. Fourthly, it is imperative to listen carefully to what women say they need and to adapt projects and services accordingly, rather than squeezing them into a pre-set delivery framework.

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Discussion

Robert Rustem, ERTF: We are putting too much pressure on Roma communities by equating integration with adaption to the majority society's standards. Roma Inclusion should become more of a two-sided process and rely on a parallel approach. Also, it is ironic that we are treating Roma mediators as indispensable for engaging with a population which has been living in Europe for centuries. By relying on Roma mediators, we put all the burden on them and fail to change the mindset of wider society.



Stanka Jankovic, EHO: It is indeed important to reflect on the meaning of 'integration' – does it carry different connotations for Roma and for the wider society? However, there is still a need for Roma mediators to bring Roma and non-Roma together and to break down barriers of mutual mistrust.

Marta Pinto, ERIO: The use of Roma bridge builders has its merits, but it should not be used as an excuse to be less ambitious or as an escape by authorities to avoid the responsibility of meeting face-to-face with Roma.

Conclusions

Marta Pinto, ERIO: Policies on Roma inclusion should incorporate a gender dimension, as Roma women face discrimination on multiple levels (both within and beyond the Roma community). We also need disaggregated data on Roma women, as official statistics are lacking for a range of reasons. Empowerment of Roma women should be achieved through education, the promotion of political participation, and teaching about rights. Inclusion strategies should be accompanied by anti-discrimination measures. We need to raise awareness of positive role models to deconstruct stereotypes and to inspire confidence within the Roma community. The hidden potential of Roma women must be better recognised.

Heather Roy, Eurodiaconia: Existing strategies on Roma inclusion at EU and national level should ensure equal access to services; we need to reflect on whether a targeted approach is necessary for Roma women and girls. However, we should also think beyond service provision; in order to be effective, inclusion processes need to incorporate an anti-discrimination angle. We need to avoid a narrow approach to Roma inclusion; Roma-specific strategies within the EU and the Council of Europe can only be effective if other comprehensive strategies (related to anti-discrimination or the European Semester) are effective. We need to achieve societal change, not just community change – inclusion is a two-way process, and we are co-responsible for breaking down the barriers which are sustaining the gap between Roma and non-Roma and between men and women. We need to clarify the meaning of a 'rights-based' approach to the inclusion of Roma women, and work towards better partnership between the genders and gender generations in projects and services. Finally, NGOs need to reflect on how to transform project outcomes into structural change, as the translation of successful, short-term projects into effective, longer-term policies remains a core challenge.