

## **A FAILING PROMISE? ROMANI WOMEN IN THE DECADE OF ROMA INCLUSION**

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The Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005 – 2015 was launched at the time when the interest in the rights of the Roma in Europe was at its peak. Within this international initiative, heads of nine European states committed to improve the situation of Roma living within their borders, with the support of the Open Society Institute, the World Bank, and other governmental and intergovernmental agencies.<sup>1</sup> The Decade-related efforts focus on the areas of education, employment, health care and housing, as many Roma live in extreme poverty, in substandard housing conditions, and their education and employment rates rank significantly lower compared to national averages.<sup>2</sup>

One of the cross-cutting themes of the Decade, besides income poverty and discrimination, is promoting gender equality. This is very much needed, as Romani women often bear the burden of multiple discrimination. As members of the stigmatized Romani community, they are discriminated on racial grounds by members of other ethnic groups on almost daily basis. On the other hand, within predominantly patriarchal Romani communities, they are put at a serious disadvantage because of their gender. Their access to education and employment, in particular, is limited by both racial and sexist prejudice.<sup>3</sup>

The multiple discrimination of Romani women remains mainly out of the limelight of contemporary research. Most human rights watchdogs focus on the rights of all Roma, often applying a gender-blind approach to human rights violations. Women's rights organizations and the universalist feminist movement, on the other hand, tend to ignore the complexity of problems that women from minority communities, including Roma, are faced with. Within the Roma movement itself, the issue of gender equality is often considered a bone of contention. Dealing with issues affecting Romani women is not only neglected, but also sometimes seen as subversive and a threat to the overall cause, as it is sometimes feared that speaking out about violations of women's rights within the Roma community, such as gender-based violence, or trafficking in women, will deepen anti-Romani prejudice by others.

The efforts taken within the Roma Decade so far, when it comes to gender concerns, unfortunately seem to be building on this mixed record. The National Action Plans (NAPs), created in all Roma Decade member countries, have been envisaged as the roadmap of implementation and foundation for the foreseen advancement of the Roma. However, the NAPs treat women's issues in a marginal matter, if at all. As an illustration, the respective situations of Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia will be briefly discussed.

In Croatia, paving the road for the Decade started in 2003, with the adoption of the National Programme for the Roma. This programme was criticized for its lack of regard for gender concerns and conceptual confusions: for instance, the section that mainly addresses women's concerns is named "The Protection of the Family, Motherhood and Youth", in contradiction to the goals of women's empowerment.<sup>4</sup> It was followed in 2004 with the Roma Decade Action Plan, meant to enhance the previous programme. The Croatian NAP refers to women's concerns in three of its four thematic sections. References to gender are strongest in the education section, where the enrollment of girls is among the set goals on all schooling levels, and a number of indicators required are disaggregated by sex. In the health section, however, the only gender-specific references deal with "family planning" and pregnant women, while the employment section merely mentions the need for training of groups such as women.

The Government of Montenegro adopted the relevant NAP in January 2005 as well. No Romani women took part in the drafting of the NAP, and as a consequence, references to gender are minimal, reduced to the sections on education and health care.<sup>5</sup> In reaction to this omission, in late 2006, the Gender Equality Office of the Government of Montenegro initiated drafting a NAP on Romani Women, as part of the implementation of the international project "Roma Women Can Do It." This process is still taking place. As of March 2007, however, the Government of Montenegro still did not earmark funds for the implementation of the Roma Decade. Instead, it decided to create another document, the Government Strategy for Roma in Montenegro, prepared by the US-based Project on Ethnic Relations in cooperation with the Ministry for the Protection of Minority Rights. The final version of the strategy is slated for publication within days, and it remains to be seen if any light will be shed on Montenegrin Romani women as well, and whether any concrete implementation of Decade plans will ensue.

Among the Decade countries, Serbia is the first state where a separate NAP on the specific situation of Romani women was created. The process of drafting NAPs slightly differed here: Instead of opting for the general NAP, as in the previous two cases, a number of separate theme-specific NAPs have been created. The NAPs dealing with the major Decade themes (education, employment, housing, and health care) have been prioritized and adopted by the Serbian Government in January 2005, just in time for the formal launch of the Decade. The NAPs on health care, employment, and education touch upon the concerns of Romani women, but only very briefly, remaining on the level of general calls for the improvement of women's position in broad terms. In March 2005, a second set of NAPs was created, including a very detailed NAP on the Specific Position of [Romani] Women, created by Roma and non-Roma, both activists and officials. This NAP provides a strong basis for addressing the multiple discrimination of Romani women. However, this plan – together with

other second-generation NAPs – has not been formally adopted so far, and it remains unclear if it can be in any way mainstreamed into the existing adopted NAPs, or whether it could be adopted on its own.<sup>6</sup> The implementation of other NAPs for the moment appears not to have obvious gender components, with the exception of specific health projects related to reproductive rights of women.

Finally, it is necessary to look at the neglect of Romani women's concern within the Decade framework from a broadened perspective as well: in both Montenegro and Serbia there is a lack of comprehensive antidiscrimination and gender equality legislation, and NAPs on gender equality, regardless of ethnicity, are still awaiting adoption. In Croatia, the effects of the Gender Equality Law (2003) and the relevant NAPs still need to be thoroughly analysed, while an all-inclusive antidiscrimination law is also missing.

Evidently, such a troubling start of the Roma Decade from the gender point of view calls for immediate monitoring and evaluation. There is an urgent need for policy developments that will support the growing Romani women's activism in the Decade member states by taking into account the multiple facets of marginalization of Romani women. Otherwise, the Roma Decade bears a high risk of transforming into a failed promise for Romani women in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the Decade of Roma Inclusion, including the full texts of all National Action Plans, can be found on its official website, <http://www.romadecade.org>.

<sup>2</sup> For statistical information on the economic and social situation of Roma in the countries of the Decade, see the UNDP Vulnerability Dataset, available at: <http://vulnerability.undp.sk>. Violations of human rights of Roma are well documented by organizations such as the Budapest-based European Roma Rights Centre, <http://errc.org>.

<sup>3</sup> For evidence of the situation of many Romani women, see Perić, Tatjana, *At the Crossroads: Human Rights of Romani Women in South East Europe*, *Identities Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, No. 1/2, Summer/Winter 2005, Skopje, Macedonia, pp. 129-62.

<sup>4</sup> Bogdanić, Ana, *The Croatian National Programme for the Roma: An Example of Gender Inequality?* in OSI EUMAP, "Overcoming Exclusion: The Roma Decade", available at: <http://www.eumap.org/journal/features/2005/romadec>.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on current policies in Montenegro when it comes to Roma and Romani women, see Perić, Tatjana, *The Romani Women's Movement in Montenegro: Chapter One*, in the forthcoming issue of the *Roma Rights* journal.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the Serbian NAP on Romani women, see Perić, Tatjana, *Addressing gender inequality in the Decade of Roma Inclusion: The case of Serbia*, in OSI EUMAP, "Overcoming Exclusion: The Roma Decade", available at: <http://www.eumap.org/journal/features/2005/romadec>.