



**Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-ninth session**

Realizing the rights of marginalized and disadvantaged women and girls

PANEL DISCUSSION

**Creating a platform for Romani women and girls:
Making them heard and seen through education**

by

**Anasztazia Nagy*
Programme Officer, Roma Education Fund**

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

The integration of the Roma community has become an important area of focus European governments in the last decade. Roma are considered to be the largest minority of Europe— 10-12 million live in Europe and around six million in the EU member states. In the majority of countries, Roma are considered to be one of the most vulnerable groups due to high levels of poverty, unemployment and discrimination. Both the “Decade of Roma Inclusion”¹ initiative launched in 2005 and the EU Framework for National Roma Strategy of the European Commission aim to support the social inclusion of Roma. Both initiatives recognize education as one of the key areas which can significantly improve the situation of Roma. The EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies through 2020 states that all EU Member States should “ensure that all Roma children have access to quality education and are not subject to discrimination or segregation, regardless of whether they are sedentary or not. Member States should ensure as a minimum that all Roma children complete at least primary school.” However, neither of these documents recognized the issue of gender perspective. Only recently have some international organizations shown a specific interest in how ethnicity interacts with gender in the case of inclusion of Roma and initiated the gender aspect in EU Roma strategies.

Internal barriers in access to education for Romani girls are very similar to the ones identified in the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Council on guaranteeing the rights of minority women and girls². They include cultural practices, early marriage, taking care of younger siblings, entrenched patriarchal structures and gender roles are important issues that raise barriers to accessing education for girls. External barriers from the majority society such as targeted and mass violence against minority groups, including minority women and girls (e.g. forced sterilization of Romani women), sexual violence or fear of violence against minority girls because of stereotypes about them, parents’ fear of violence against their daughters on the journey to school in more remote regions, also act as barriers to education. In addition, though education is free of charge in most countries, the hidden cost of education, including clothing, educational materials, and transportation costs can encourage parents and girls to stay at home and help in housework or to participate in an income generating activity. Moreover, disadvantaged Romani girls and women are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, forced labor, debt bondage, child labor, and forced prostitution.

The time of school leaving varies by country. However, the most critical age group is 10-16, when Romani girls start working, becoming more involved in child care and housework, getting married or falling victim to trafficking. The issue of early marriage in Roma communities has sparked debates on women’s (and children’s) fundamental rights in traditional cultural contexts. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) survey shows that across all EU Member States surveyed, around 2% of Roma girls aged 10-15 were ‘traditionally married’ or cohabitating with a partner. In the case of young people aged 16 and 17, the results show that on average around 16% of Roma men and women were legally or traditionally married or cohabiting. Among the Member States surveyed, this was reported more frequently by young

¹ The Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015 is an unprecedented political commitment by European governments to eliminate discrimination against Roma and close the unacceptable gaps between Roma and the rest of society. The Decade focuses on the priority areas of education, employment, health, and housing.

² Human Rights Council, Recommendations of the Forum on Minority Issues at its fourth session: guaranteeing the rights of minority women and girls (29 and 30 November 2011)

women in Greece, Portugal, Romania and Bulgaria, however the survey does not include countries such as Moldova, Bulgaria, Serbia, where a high number of Roma also are. In Serbia, for instance, 57% of Romani girls got married before age 18, based on the UNICEF MICS survey.³ Marriage highly affects educational activity because the partner or parents often do not allow the girl to continue her education. Only 6% of Roma women aged 16-17 who were married or cohabiting were in school, compared to 36% of all Roma women in this age group.⁴

Due to different reasons, schooling of Romani girls in Europe is often terminated before the legal school leaving age of the country, which is in most cases is 16 years. This also indicates the insufficient monitoring system of the educational administration which is responsible for identifying children at risk of early school leaving and tracking their educational path. An additional problem of the educational system is that there is often limited flexibility or any type of second chance/adult educational program to enable Romani girls and women to re-enroll and complete formal education. The hostile school environment contributes to a large extent to girls drop out of education. In a survey with Roma girls in Serbia⁵, the hostility of the school environment and the prejudices of the teachers were ranked as the most common reason among girls leaving school early (69% of respondents). The teachers often ignore or don't take measures against racist bullying and harassment against Roma kids by their non- Roma peers.

These factors contribute to the low educational outcomes and literacy level of Romani girls and women. According to the comparative survey of the UNDP/WB/EC, which analyzed the situation of Romani women in 12 countries of South-Eastern Europe, Romani males in the 18-34 age groups spend an average of about 6.5 years in the education system compared to Romani females within the same age group, who spend 5.8 years in school. The gap is much higher when we compare Romani girls to non-Romani, who spent an average 10.9 years in the educational system. In the 35-49 age group, Romani males spent an average of 7 years enrolled in school - Romani females only 5.7 years, compared to 10 years spent in school by non- Romani women.⁶ The data suggests that the number of years spent in school for younger generations has not only remained stagnant, but continues to decline.

Regarding literacy level the FRA has conducted a comparative analysis in the Member States of EU, which states that the gender differences are highest in Portugal where 55% of Roma women aged 16 years and over can read and write compared with 77 % of Roma men. The gap in literacy levels between Roma women and men is also notable in Romania (64 % vs. 76 %) and Greece (43 % vs. 55 %).⁷

³ Serbia MULTIPLE INDICATOR CLUSTER SURVEY (MICS) 2014

⁴ FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Analysis of FRA Roma survey results by gender <http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ep-request-roma-women.pdf>

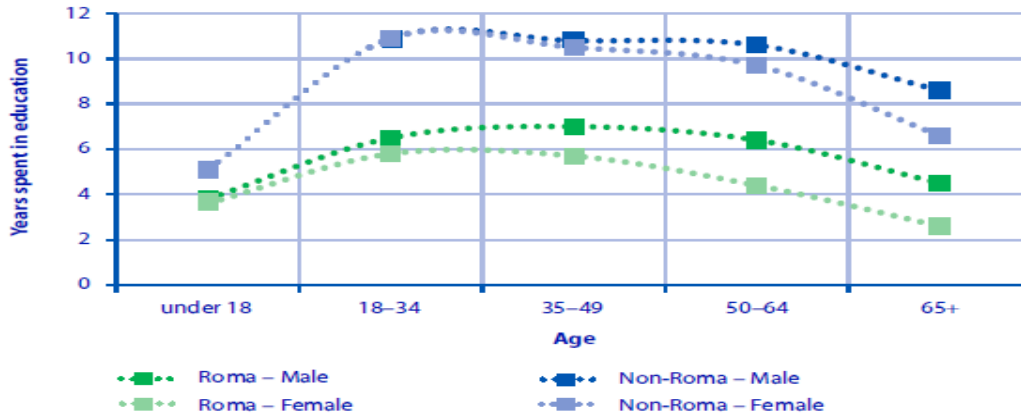
⁵ CARE Int, 2011: Situational analyses of Education and Social Inclusion of Roma Girls in Serbia, page 19

⁶ Cukrowska, E., Kocze, A. (2013). Interplay between gender and ethnicity: exposing structural disparities of Romani women. Analysis of the UNDP/World Bank/EC regional Roma survey data. Roma Inclusion Working Papers. Bratislava: UNDP.

⁷ FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Analysis of FRA Roma survey results by gender <http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ep-request-roma-women.pdf>

Figure 2: Years in education by age groups

Average number of years spent in education by gender and ethnicity in each age group



Source: UNDP/WB/EC regional Roma survey 2011

Based on the question "How many years did s/he spend in school in total?"

One of the main questions is whether we can observe some changes over the past decade. According to the main findings of the Regional Roma survey the ethnic gap as well as the gender gap for the average dropout rates were higher in 2004 and declined in 2011. However the most significant decline occurred among Roma males – the probability of dropping out from school for this group of individuals (when compared with non-Roma males) has declined nearly by half. The estimates for literacy rate show that over the period of 2004-2011 for Roma the gender gap in literacy rate remains the same. Finally in terms of educational attainment the gender gap between Roma boys and girls has slightly decreased over the period of 2004-2011.

It is important to note, that despite the evident gap in educational attainment of Roma and non-Roma there is an emerging positive trend in the last few years for those that made it successfully to higher education: more Roma are entering universities today than ten years ago. The gender statistics collected by the Roma Education Fund⁸ within the Tertiary Scholarship Program (REFSP) in Serbia, Macedonia and Albania show that the female beneficiaries' ratios are higher than that of male (i.e. between 56% and 75%). These figures are also consistent with the relatively high ratios of females in the mainstream body of students in these countries (i.e. 53% in Macedonia, 54% in Serbia and 55% in Albania for 2010, according to the national statistics agencies).

Options for policy interventions

- National governments and EU should acknowledge the particular challenges and barriers faced by Romani women. Situation analysis of Romani girls with accompanying strategy should be included into the already existing EU Roma Framework Strategy, as well as in National Roma Strategies and Roma Decade Actions Plans;
- In some countries there are specific programs and budgets for the Roma minority, financed from EU or governmental budgets, as well as specific educational programs, such as scholarship and mentorship programs targeted for Roma. Governments should

⁸ www.romaeducationfund.org

take measures to identify and integrate a gender perspective in these educational programs in order to be able to track the educational path of Romani girls and to improve their school participation. Also, governments should develop and implement inclusive and targeted education policies that provide access to high-quality learning environments for all Roma women and girls;

- Governments should develop formal/informal/non-formal adult-literacy programs for Roma women who missed out on education. Second chance programs should be developed and introduced for dropped out youth, which can take into account the specific needs and situation of Romani girls;
- Governments should develop awareness raising campaign for young Romani girls and their parents, which would aim to overcome the traditional gender roles and encourage school participation of Romani girls;
- Women organizations and educational organizations at the national and international level should put an emphasis on particularly vulnerable and marginalized groups including Roma, with a view to ensuring that the situation of minority women is addressed and mainstreamed into all their programmes;
- Government supported social services should empower young Roma mothers in the scope of education and care since, as the main care givers of young children, they can further enhance the education prospects for their children.