



Addressing gender inequality in the Decade of Roma Inclusion: the case of Serbia

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Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed both the blossoming of the Romani movement in Serbia and an overwhelmingly increased interest in the rights of Roma in the country. But even though they were officially recognised as a minority in 2002,² Roma continue to face racial discrimination on a daily basis.³ Victims of violence from both extremist groups and law enforcers, they are mostly uneducated and rarely hold jobs other than in the informal economy.⁴ Many Serbian Roma live in extreme poverty in illegal substandard settlements, including tens of thousands of Roma who have been forced out of Kosovo in 1999. Numerous national and international organisations try to address these issues, but the effectiveness of the results is often disputable.

Romani women face still further burdens and obstacles. In addition to the discrimination and dearth of opportunities all Roma are confronted with, they grapple with both subjection to patriarchal norms and conventions within Romani society and the particular ill-treatment of Roma women by other groups.

After a draft national Strategy for the Integration and Empowerment of Roma was first produced in 2002, the launch of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in turn led to the formulation of National Action Plans (NAP) following the Decade's thematic priorities. Serbia is the only country among the Decade participants that created a separate NAP specifically focusing on the discrimination of Romani women. However, the Serbian Government has not formally approved this plan, and its possible mainstreaming into adopted NAPs has not been formally clarified and agreed.

Romani women: When race and gender intersect

Romani women bear a double burden, of both racial and gender discrimination. They are discriminated as "Gypsies" by the majority society, which views them as members of a marginalised and often despised group.⁵ However, at home, Romani women are often considered inferior on the basis of their gender in a community that is led almost exclusively by men.⁶

Racial and gender discrimination often act intertwined. For example, the pressure of the community will force many young Romani women to leave school in their prepubescent years in order to get married. At the same time, in the education process, Romani girls also face the risk of segregation in education, being placed in so-called special schools for children with mental disabilities, or discriminated by their non-Romani peers and/or teachers.⁷ Because of their lack of formal education and racial discrimination in hiring procedures, but also because of the pressure of families that do not always consider it proper for women to work outside the home, a vast majority of Romani women are unemployed.⁸

Moreover, racial discrimination also expresses itself in gender-specific ways. For example, when Romani women victims of domestic violence try to report their abusers to the police, they risk suffering ridicule and being given the advice that "if they had behaved themselves" this would not have happened.⁹ It has been asserted by Romani women activists that the gender dimension of racial discrimination has not yet been clearly articulated by either the women's rights nor the Roma rights movement.¹⁰ The majority of organisations currently

addressing the rights of Roma highlight the human rights abuses against the ethnic group as a whole, often completely ignoring the gender component of abuses.

On the positive side, as of lately, Romani women's organisations have been mushrooming all over Serbia, and there is an evident increase of Romani women getting university education.¹¹ Three Romani women hold positions within state institutions in Vojvodina and Serbia.¹² But the positive sides each show up further complications of the Roma women's double burden. For example, Romani women activists are still rarely consulted by non-Romani organisations and institutions implementing projects targeting Romani women. On the other hand, women activists face the strongly patriarchal system of their own community, where quite a few Romani leaders believe that tackling issues such as trafficking or domestic violence constitutes a subversive attack against the community as a whole, and undermines the wider struggle for Roma emancipation.¹³

The process leading up to the Roma Decade, preceded by the formulation of a national Strategy for the Integration and Empowerment of Roma, raised the opportunity to tackle Romani women's concerns on a national policy level. The actual beginning of the Decade itself provides a first opportunity to review the prospects for implementing measures to effect actual change.

Preparations for the Roma Decade

Attempts to resolve Roma concerns in a systematic manner date from December 2002, when the draft Strategy for the Integration and Empowerment of Roma was drafted under the auspices of the federal Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, with the support of all major intergovernmental agencies, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in particular. The team drafting the Strategy consisted of two foreign experts appointed by the OSCE, and four national consultants. The strategy was formed in consultation with nine specialised expert groups, comprising mostly of Romani activists, and also with various governmental and intergovernmental institutions.

One of the expert teams focused on women and children's issues and included eight distinguished Romani women activists from all over Serbia.¹⁴ Consequently, the draft Strategy included a section on the current situation with regards to Romani women in Serbia and also brought forward a number of practical recommendations, such as programmes in literacy and healthcare education for Romani women of all ages.¹⁵

The Strategy also envisaged the creation of institutions for its implementation, and just several months later, in April 2003, the Secretariat for the Roma National Strategy commenced its operation within the auspices of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights. Its three-member staff includes only one Romani person. It is one of the leading Romani women's rights activists in the country, but she was nevertheless hired only as an assistant. At the same time, in a parallel process, the Roma National Council was founded in May 2003 as a counselling body to the same Ministry.¹⁶ The Secretariat's first task was to initiate a public debate on the draft strategy and in April 2004 the Roma National Council adopted the Strategy.¹⁷

By late 2004-early 2005, the Secretariat also took on the coordination of the drafting process of the National Action Plans for the Roma Decade. The integration of these two processes did not appear difficult, as they shared the same objectives in the same thematic areas. In fact, the overlap with the newly established Roma Decade definitely accelerated the policy-making process. One of the working groups convened by the Secretariat created the draft action plan on the specific situation of Romani women. It consisted of seasoned gender activists, both Romani and non-Romani, from both governmental, intergovernmental and civil society organisations.¹⁸

The four major action plans in the areas prioritised by the Roma Decade – education, employment, housing and health care – were officially adopted by the Government of Serbia on 27 January 2005, just in time for the formal opening of the Decade in Sofia on 2 February.¹⁹ Some of the plans touch upon the concerns of Romani women, but only very

briefly. The action plan on health care, for instance, envisages the creation of programmes related to reproductive health and women's health. Measures related to employment mention the need for increasing the employability of Romani women only in general terms, and even the very elaborate plan on Roma education leaves it at a general call for support to Romani girls in the education system. This lack of detail when it comes to addressing gender aspects in Roma education is particularly alarming when taking into account that the presence of Romani women in Serbian schools or in the Serbian work force is several times lower still than the already low number of Romani men.²⁰

The drafting of other action plans was completed in March 2005. The action plans have largely followed the outlines created previously by the 2002 strategy in the following areas: persons returned under readmission agreements, internally displaced persons, media and information, culture, social assistance, anti-discrimination measures, as well as the specific situation of women. This arrangement clearly differed from the ways in which NAPs were fashioned in other Roma Decade countries, which mostly focused on the four aforementioned Decade priority subjects. It meant that Serbia created the only NAP that dealt exclusively with the discrimination of Romani women.

The National Action Plan on the Specific Position of Women

The working group on Romani women finished their plan at the end of March 2005. Though the Government of Serbia has not discussed nor approved this or any other second-round plans that did not cover the four Decade priorities, the beginning of the implementation of the National Action Plans was nevertheless announced by the Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica on 7 April 2005, on the occasion of the International Roma Day.²¹

Of all the National Action Plans, the one on Romani women is the second most detailed, after the plan on education; obviously, it is a result of an enthusiastic effort. In a similar vein to other action plans, this plan also begins with the personal documents issue, yet again the particular situation of Romani women in this respect is regrettably not mentioned. In fact, the reader cannot help but get the impression that this section might have been simply copied and pasted from other, gender-blind plans, even linguistically referring to Romani men alone. But the plan continues with a number of extremely relevant proposed actions.

With regard to education, the plan calls for a decrease in the number of illiterate Romani women, through affirmative measures for women's education, organising large educational campaigns that also aim to influence Romani parents and launching literacy courses for adult women. It calls for the collection of data to monitor Romani women's illiteracy, the introduction of monitoring mechanisms on girls in the education process and the elimination of gender and ethnic stereotypes from the curricula and schoolbooks.

The plan also calls for the improvement in health care for Romani women, through increasing the accessibility of health services to women, collecting data on Romani women's health, and protecting the general and reproductive health of Romani women. In the field of housing rights, the plan emphasises the need for physical accessibility for Romani women to public services and institutions, and the increase of Romani women's familiarity with property rights.

Finally, the National Action Plan advocates the introduction of affirmative measures related to the employment of Romani women. It calls for increased opportunities for their self-employment through continued vocational training and state-supported business loans, and for education programmes on labour rights. Strikingly, it calls for state subvention to private businesses hiring Romani women and for the introduction of quotas of Romani women in the state labour force.

The issue of equal rights of Romani women in their families and the society at large has been addressed as well. The plan urges for the public and political participation of Romani women in political parties and parliamentary bodies, the efficient, non-discriminatory application of laws criminalising violence against women, and access to relevant governmental and non-governmental protection schemes. The plan invites an open discussion on the issues of early

marriage and arranged marriage, and urges the sensitisation of public institutions when dealing with violence against Romani women.

The plan also dwells on the concerns of Romani children: It recommends establishing legal and functional mechanisms for protecting women and children from trafficking, ensuring Romani children's equal access to cultural and development programmes, increasing the competencies of Romani parents, and approaching the problem of Romani street children in a systematic manner.

The Action Plan on the Specific Situation of Romani Women is the only National Action Plan that included a Roma women's organisation among the implementers and monitors of the National Action Plans. The greater importance of this plan, however, is of a wider scope: as mentioned, this is the only National Action Plan dealing specifically with women created in any of the Roma Decade countries. In comparison, only the general action plan for Hungary has a section on women, while the other action plans at best marginally mention Romani women, or do not pay any attention to the gender dimension at all. Additionally, observers believe that the commendable contents of the NAP are the result of a successful selection of members of the working group that drafted the plan. They included Roma and non-Roma, experienced gender and human rights activists, and people working for state institutions, foundations and NGOs, who all shared a common concern for gender equality.²²

All in all, despite minor deficiencies, the text of the National Action Plan on the Specific Situation of Women still provided a strong and adequate basis for addressing the multiple discrimination of Romani women in Serbia. It also provided the possibility that Romani women would be included in its eventual practical implementation as well.

The next step: implementation, or the lack of it

In Serbia, the International Roma Day of 2005 was additionally marked by the formal commencement of the implementation of National Action Plans. However, it remains unclear whether the Serbian Government has indeed approved of the second round of action plans, including the one on women. The lack of any information available publicly gives the impression that this was not the case.

Another major concern is that the carefully drafted measures from the plan on women should now - reportedly and unofficially - be mainstreamed through the four major Decade priority plans. This should be a major priority, considering the lack of explicit references to gender issues in those plans.

In fact, it seems that gender mainstreaming was not on the agenda during the drafting of any of the major National Action Plans and that all gender-related concerns were instead left solely to the National Action Plan on the specific situation of women. For example, they rightly highlight the need to improve the access of Roma to personal documents, which would allow them to exercise numerous human rights they are currently denied. But they fail to acknowledge the gender component of this problem and the fact that among those Roma who do not have personal documents the majority are women.²³

The initial intention was for the separate programme to be mainstreamed in the main National Action Plans. But it now remains unclear how this could be done at this point, considering that these plans have already been officially adopted, and that no procedure is envisaged for either *post festum* introduction of gender concerns, or monitoring of this process.

No information is available on the current status of the plans and their implementation. Apparently, the Ministry of Finance is in the process of drafting relevant budgets, and in reality the implementation is slated to commence in September this year at the earliest. This highlights one of the most bitter concerns with regards to the Decade: Even though Serbia will receive \$8 million from unspecified Decade donors for the overall implementation of the action plans, this is well below expectations and any realistic estimate of the funding that would be needed to indeed support major systematic change.²⁴ Considering that the state is on the one hand impoverished, and on the other burdened with numerous problems ranging from dealing

with past war crimes to an ongoing economic crisis, that does not leave much hope in terms of finding its own means for this ambitious project.

The Secretariat for the Roma National Strategy has also suffered from internal blows: while the head of the office recently left to join the newly formed Roma Education Fund and has not yet been replaced, the only Romani staff member is soon scheduled to leave for personal reasons. There is no publicly available information on who the new staff would be, yet neither are there any transparent calls for applicants. It is most unfortunate that the Secretariat is reduced at such a crucial moment.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, it is extremely important that Romani and non-Romani women's rights advocates in Serbia persist in their ardent activism to push for the implementation of the National Action Plan. Otherwise, despite all the efforts taken by its drafters, the Roma Decade might remain only an unfulfilled promise for Romani women in Serbia.

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² See Article 4 of the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities, *Official Gazette of Serbia and Montenegro*, No. 11/2002.

³ For detailed information on human rights abuses of Roma in Serbia, see European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Memorandum: The Protection of Roma Rights in Serbia and Montenegro*, Belgrade, 2003, available at: www.errc.org.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-20.

⁵ See Svenka Savic, "Zene iz manjinskih grupa i govor mrznje", in Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, *Izmedju nacela i prakse: polozej "malih" i "velikih" manjina u Srbiji*, Belgrade, 2004, pp. 44-8.

⁶ See Veronika Mitro et al., *The Invisible Ones: Human Rights of Romani Women in Vojvodina*, Novi Sad, 2004.

⁷ See ERRC, above n. 3, p. 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-2 and Mitro et al., above n. 6, pp. 37-9.

⁹ See Mitro et al., above n. 6, p. 11.

¹⁰ See for example the statement of Angela Kocze in "Romani woman addresses European Parliament", 27 November 2003, available at: www.erionet.org/Wom.html, or Alexandra Oprea, "Re-envisioning Social Justice from the Ground Up: Including the Experiences of Romani Women", in *Essex Human Rights Review*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 29-39.

¹¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Faces of Poverty, Faces of Hope: Vulnerability Profiles for Decade of Roma Inclusion Countries*, Bratislava, 2005, p. 63.

¹² Romani activist Slavica Vasic is Assistant with the Secretariat for the Roma National Strategy within the federal Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, Jelena Jovanovic is an officer of the Secretariat for National Minorities of the Vojvodina Province, while Vesna Ackovic serves as Adviser to the Ministry of Education and Sport of the Republic of Serbia.

¹³ See for example 'Sijeku granu na kojoj sjede', *Vijesti*, Podgorica, 22 April 2005, and 'Toskic – vlast zaradjuje i na Ciganima', *Dan*, Podgorica, 24 April 2005.

¹⁴ Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, "Strategy for the Integration and Empowerment of Roma", available at: www.humanrights.gov.yu, pp. 10, 18-9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-2.

¹⁶ Out of 35 members of the Roma National Council, only two are women – NGO activists Sofka Vasiljkovic and Slavica Mrdja; neither holds a senior position in the Council.

¹⁷ See above n. 14.

¹⁸ E-mail communication with the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, on file with author.

¹⁹ All National Action Plans are available on the website of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, www.humanrights.gov.yu. It is important to note that, though the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights is a federal ministry, it only dealt with NAPs and Roma Decade activities on the territory of Serbia. In Montenegro, these activities were coordinated by the Ministry for National Minorities of the Republic of Montenegro.

²⁰ See Natasa Kocic Rakocevic and Andjelka Miljevic, *The Roma and Education: Between Needs, Wishes and Possibilities*, Belgrade, 2003.

²¹ "Cestitke Romima", *Dnevnik*, Novi Sad, 9 April 2005.

²² See above n. 18; for example, the group included Vera Kurtic of the NGO Women's Space, Jadranka Stojanovic of the Fund for an Open Society Serbia, Zorana Sijacki of the Vojvodina Secretariat for Labour, Employment and Gender Equality, and others.

²³ For more information on the statelessness problem among Roma in Serbia, see Tatjana Perić, 'Personal Documents and Threats to the Exercise of Fundamental Rights of Roma in Europe', *Roma Rights*, No. 3/2003.

²⁴ "Osam miliona dolara za bolji položaj Roma u Srbiji i Crnoj Gori", *Danas*, Belgrade, 15 January 2005.