

THE SITUATION OF ROMA/GYPSY WOMEN IN EUROPE

(by Nicoleta Bity)

1. INTRODUCTION

The Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies decided at its 7th meeting (Strasbourg, 29-30 March 1999) to put on the agenda of its next meeting the issue of the situation of Roma/Gypsy women in Europe and to request a consultant to prepare a short introductory report to this issue.

The main objectives of the present report are as follows:

- To review the activities carried on in the field of Roma/Gypsy women rights and their results
- To analyse the existing instruments and mechanisms to address this issue at national and international level
- To give information to the Specialist Group about initiatives taken by Roma women's non-governmental organisations
- To raise some taboo questions for the every day life of Roma/Gypsy women

In the history of the Roma/Gypsy people in Europe, discriminations against them were expressed in different ways. Since 1989, and even before, the Roma/Gypsies organised themselves increasingly in order to defend their rights and fight against the pogroms. This mobilisation brought many results:

- It brought to the attention of the international community the human rights violations facing the Roma/Gypsies
- Specific provisions were made and there was a general recognition of the specific position of the Roma/Gypsy people
- There started to be a mobilisation of a social category of Roma/Gypsy women in the human rights activists movement accompanied by an effort to define their identity and their social role

Recently, a new context appeared in which the member States took their responsibilities and started to elaborate State policies in favour of the Roma/Gypsy minority; in Central and Eastern European countries, mob violence against the Roma came to an end but the conflict in Kosovo came as a new form of violence against the Roma.

At the same time, it is becoming more and more difficult to assess the human rights violations of the Roma/Gypsies and it requires more and more specialised skills on behalf of the Romani activists. In fact, the usual presentation of the situation of the Roma/Gypsies is not sufficient anymore to cover in details all aspects of the discriminations and human rights violations the Roma/Gypsies are faced with. This is even more true when talking about Romani women's rights. Hopefully a new generation of skilled and well-trained young activists is emerging on the international scene.

Bearing in mind this new context, the report emphasises the diversity of problems Romani women are faced with according to their very diverse situations throughout Europe. The extreme complexity of the issue to be analysed results from this variety of situations.

Therefore, some criteria have to be borne in mind when analysing the issue of Roma/Gypsy women:

- The group of Roma/Gypsy to which the women belong
- Their place of living - urban or rural
- Their marital status: married and single women (within the latter category, we also have the group of the single mothers)
- The social group to which they belong
- The specificities of the culture of the majority population
- The religion

The issue of Roma/Gypsy women has not been a matter for particular attention for the international organisations so far. It is nonetheless possible to find out what was the approach chosen by looking at who organised the few meetings devoted to this question and what were the topics on the agenda of these meetings.

The Roma/Gypsy non-governmental organisations did not so far pay much attention neither to the situation of the Roma/Gypsy women, and especially not in case of crisis situations, even if it is usually the Roma/Gypsy women who keep the contact with the majority communities.

Even if we should not victimise too much the Roma/Gypsy women, it is true that they are often victims of violence, either domestic or resulting from the majority population discriminatory attitudes. The fact that the level of awareness on this topic is not high is also the result of the lack of a Roma women's movement at international level.

There are data available on Roma/Gypsy populations in Europe, as a result of censuses, but they provide us with very few information about the number of Roma/Gypsy women, which is in a way an illustration of the lack of knowledge about the situation of Romani women. According to the data on some countries from Central and Eastern Europe, the percentage of Roma/Gypsy women in the total Roma/Gypsy population does not differ very much from the average percentage of women in the majority population.

Indicator/State	Bulgaria	Former Czechoslovakia	Romania	Present Yugoslavia (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, including Kosovo and Montenegro)
Total Roma Population	312.542	288.440	410.087	141.927
Male (absolute data)	156.387	146.528	203.055	71.868
Male (%)	50,04%	50.8%	50,63%	50.64%
Female (absolute data)	156.155	141.912	198.032	70.059
Female (%)	49,96%	49,2%	49,37%	49,36%

This lack of statistical data reveals the need for in-depth studies about Roma/Gypsy women and about their own organisations.

The life of Roma/Gypsy women is often characterised by a conflict between the traditional culture and modern developments. But again, this is not to be generalised. There are striking

differences between for example the problems faced by activist Roma/Gypsy women and the young Roma/Gypsy women belonging to the Kalderash Roma group.

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2. A SHORT OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF THE INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES RELATED TO ROMANI/GYPSY WOMEN ISSUES

The first Congress of the Roma/Gypsies from the European Union - Seville, Spain, May 1994.

Many participants attended the Seville congress, organised with the support of the European Commission. It is striking to note that, in the final report (which forms a real book), there is no mention of the presence of any working group devoted to the issue of Roma/Gypsy women.

However, the presence of Gypsy women from Spain and of activist women from Western European countries had an important impact on the Congress because of their advanced experience in working on Roma/Gypsy women's rights issues in Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, etc.

The result of the Congress was the publication of a "*Manifest of Roma/Gypsy women*", as well as few pieces of information under the social policy and educational panels, in which there were mentions of the situation of different groups of Roma/Gypsy women.

The Manifest of Roma/Gypsy women is unique in that it refers to the situation of Roma/Gypsy women from the European Union and it is the only existing document with such a specific reference to Western European Roma women. The manifest also gives an idea of the context of the Roma women's movement at that time, by referring to the situation of *the women and their children* in the framework of social, educational and cultural life and of the war in the former Yugoslavia.

Emphasis is put on the education and social policies. Nevertheless, the Manifest is a sensitive provocation to the cultural values; for instance, it stresses the need:

"To allow the Roma/Gypsy woman to take full responsibility of their cultural role and traditional values as defined by Roma/Gypsy culture, including in contexts where these values are obstacles to this expression"

Another key point in the Manifest is the fact that the participants acknowledge that the lack of self-esteem is an underlying factor explaining the most difficult problems facing Roma/Gypsy women. This point is clearly seen in the document as a major problem the entire Roma/Gypsy elite is faced with nowadays.

The Manifest finally proposes the creation of a working group of reflexion and action with the participation of women from the European Union and from other countries; this proposal was never put in practice.

Following *The Hearing of Roma/Gypsy women organised by the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, September 29-30 1995*, Conclusions were drawn up by the General Rapporteur of the Hearing, Mrs Gimenez Adelantado. The latter document shows the tendency of the participants in the Hearing to speak more about the general situation of the Roma people than about their specific situation as women. The emphasis is put on the economic situation and

the unemployment problems facing the Roma people in general, and in particular, the Roma/Gypsy women.

One comment made after that Hearing was as follows: "... Speaking in 1995 in front of the European Parliament, the Roma/Gypsy women preferred to underline the social and ethnic discriminations against their own communities rather than to speak about their daily difficulties; they are more than men faced with the gaps in the schooling of their children and the lack of access to the health services. Even if they are in front of the European Parliament or in private discussions, they (Roma/Gypsy women) are discrete about their relationship with the men."

The differences between the Hearing of Strasbourg and the Congress of Seville are as follows:

- The Seville Congress is more specific about the particular situation of the Roma/Gypsy women;
- The Hearing introduces for the first time in the debate a discussion on the mechanisms and institutions dealing with the rights of women in general and the use which can be made of them by Roma/Gypsy women;
- At the Hearing, the difficult position of the Roma women, who are at the intersection of the traditional culture and the modernity, was described as follows: "the development of Roma/Gypsy women should be in harmony with their more positive traditional cultural values and in accordance with their vision of life and of the world" ;
- It is stated in the last paragraph of the Conclusions of the Hearing that most Council of Europe projects have an important gender equality component as it is usually requested that these projects promote equality between women and men.

The Conclusions of the Hearing are very concrete and show an improved awareness among Roma women of the resources existing at the Council of Europe; however, they still contain a number of general recommendations concerning the entire Roma/Gypsy community.

The Hearing introduced a new dimension in the discussion about the situation of Roma women as it was convened by the Steering Committee for the Equality between Women and Men of the Council of Europe, which shows the beginning of an integrated approach of the Roma/Gypsy women issues within the gender equality programmes rather than within the specific Roma/Gypsy programmes.

The international conference of the Romani Women, Budapest, June 1998.

It was organized by the Roma Participation Programme of the Open Society Institute in Budapest. This meeting mainly focused on women from Central and Eastern European countries; however, three women from Spain took part in it. The whole discussion focused on the positive and negative elements in the traditional Roma culture, which have consequences in the daily life of the Roma/Gypsy women. The main question was put as follows: what should we keep and what should we change?

The meeting brought to light the coexistence of conservative and more progressive ideas. These differences were obviously resulting from the different levels of organisation of women from different countries as well as their different levels of access to information on international bodies and the associative movement of the Roma/Gypsy community.

The idea of a European organisation of Roma/Gypsy women's associations was launched, but it was finally decided that there was no need for a new structure. The participants decided that the Roma/Gypsy women should first identify more common ideas and try to work

together within an informal forum rather than to repeat the mistakes made by Roma organisations in the past.

The concrete results of the meeting were a joint internship of the Roma Participation Program and Network Women Program of the Open Society Institute for a 6 months period in the Budapest office of the Open Society and one fellowship for an advanced women leadership training.

The OSCE Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Gender Issues, Vienna, June 1999.

In the final report of the meeting, under the Working Group II on "Action in the security sphere - Focus in post-conflict rehabilitation", the following recommendation was made:

To "have a gender component in the ongoing work on Roma/Sinti; including put this explicitly on the agenda for the next supplementary meeting in September 1999".

3. STATE POLICIES IN FAVOUR OF ROMA /GYPSIES AND THEIR GENDER COMPONENT

A number of member States are elaborating and/or implementing State policies towards their Roma/Gypsy populations. They are at different stages of elaboration/implementation. The level of civic awareness among Roma/Gypsy women is also at different stages in different countries.

Governments are usually reluctant to add a women component in their policies as it is seen as a factor which might increase the expenses from the State budget. However, my opinion is that this is not the case and that the mention of women and men in the various strategies and programmes is nothing more than restoring the principle of equality of opportunities for women.

Czech Republic : The State policy is quite silent on the issue of gender equality. Some provisions in the national programme are beneficial for the Roma/Gypsy women as they favour access to the educational and training programmes and allow the creation of civic advisory centres, where women can be employed. Even if the underlying concept of the programme is non-discrimination, understood as prohibition of discrimination but also refusal of positive action, equality between men and women is not even mentioned in it.

Slovak Republic : There is one single reference to gender in the "Conceptual intends of the Slovak Government of the Government of the Slovak Republic for solution of the problems of Romany population under current social and economic conditions ": "him" and "her" when provisions are intended to explicitly apply to both sex. Indirect provisions directed towards women are included in the health programmes (preparation for the marriage, contraception and parental responsibility, provisions for the future families). These provisions seem to express the view that Roma/Gypsy parents are not responsible and that they have to be made more aware of their responsibilities.

Bulgaria : the National Plan for the Roma community is far more advanced on gender equality issues, in comparison with the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. There is a separate item in the Plan dealing with the promotion of a "culture of equality". It is to be underlined here that the recommendations in favour of women respect the general philosophy of the Plan, which is to introduce specific provisions for Roma and, in the same spirit, special provisions for Roma/Gypsy women, instead of integration of the gender component in the other main areas covered by the Plan.

"The Former-Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" : Research has been carried out on gender issues applied to Roma in the field of employment but when it comes to proposals for solutions of the problems, there is no mention of gender.

Spain has the most advanced policy towards Roma/Gypsy women. Specific provisions are included in its the National Development Programme for the Gypsy community. The Programme for the Development of the Gypsy Population of the Autonomous Government of Andalusia should be taken as a model for other countries as it emphasises as a priority the situation of Gypsy women, includes detailed provisions in all areas of daily life and has a special part on equality of opportunities for women.

Countries like **Hungary and Finland**, which have adopted advanced and long-term policies, do not have any gender component. It is however planned in the phase of implementation that Romani women can have access to jobs to be created in the framework of the programmes.

In **Romania**, the elaboration of the governmental programme is not yet finished but, in the terms of reference, it is stated that attention should be paid to the access of Roma/Gypsy women to the jobs created.

4. THE CIVIL SOCIETY OF THE ROMANI WOMEN AND THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL LIFE

There are no clear data about Roma/Gypsy women's non-governmental organisations. The Open Society Institute started this Spring to build up a database of such NGOs. There are different ways in approaching the issues regarding women in the NGOs; the most common approach is to tackle issues linked with children's schooling or education and with health programmes. This limited approach is the result of a lack of studies in the field of gender equality when dealing with Roma, and especially with Roma activists.

It is however encouraging to see that individual women (who are not leaders of large groups) started to think and to act in favour of equalising the access of women to different kinds of resources.

There are common thoughts and actions among these women, or they share the same philosophy on how to approach Roma/Gypsy issues, but this does not form a movement in favour of women's rights. There are very valuable initiatives in some countries such as Spain, the UK (within the Travellers' group), "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" or Slovakia but they are not brought together. There are also differences between the women's involvement in women's organisations according to their countries of origin. It seems that from one country to another, there are different ways of being active in favour of Roma/Gypsy women's rights, i.e.: some work in Roma/Gypsy organisations with broad programmes and with some integrated gender components, some as activists in Roma/Gypsy women's organisations, and others are involved in majority political parties.

At local level, successful projects are being developed, for instance in Slovakia, "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Hungary and Romania. It is the beginning of the process of construction of a Roma/Gypsy women civil society movement.

A strategy of development for the Roma/Gypsy women's civil movement is to be built up around individuals who really believe in the equality of opportunities for women; in this respect, the recurrent debate among Romani activists about the representativity should be left over for the time being as, at the present stage of development of the Roma women's activist movement, this usual debate (common to all ethnic groups) is not important.

The Roma/Gypsy activists are faced with the values of their families, values which are sometimes related to the social group to which the family belongs or to other rules of the culture; at the same time, they are faced with the patriarchal values of the majority society, especially in Central and Eastern European countries and with the attitude of the male Romani activists.

Moreover, the women who choose to take responsibility in public life are looking for an identity which can give them the feeling of belonging to something, as they find themselves between the two cultures and two worlds. Therefore, they are in the phase of leadership learning and training.

Another characteristic of the Roma/Gypsy civil society is the attitude single activist women are faced with at a certain age: in fact, they have to work three times more than the others in order to gain respect from the males. This is even worse when women are single and do not have children. The married women often consider the single women as being a threat for them and for their husbands as they deal on an equal footing with the men.

The problems faced by Roma/Gypsy women's organisations are very much related to the lack of access to information at international level, especially concerning the existing international remedies in case of violations of women's human rights. This lack of information is worsened by a general lack of knowledge of the English language.

5. THE SENSITIVE ISSUES FOR ROMA/GYPSY WOMEN

The sensitive issues listed below are phenomena which occur in the whole society, they are not specific to the Roma communities and culture. However, the aim of this chapter is to open a discussion on these issues. The Specialist Group included the situation of Roma/Gypsy women within the items listed in its Plan of Work and it will have to decide on possible ways to deal with these subjects.

Most of the problems Roma/Gypsy women are faced with are sensitive and unexpressed, be they activists, wives and mothers or "bori" (daughter-in-law) in a local community. In addition to that, they spend their whole lives between the two worlds, "gadgé" and Romani.

The Romani women have to respect firstly the rules of the traditional culture according to which they were educated since their childhood; in this context, their social role is very precisely defined. At the same time, when they reach school age, they are confronted either with their own communities (if they live in a traditional one) or with the prejudices of the other children, created by the majority parents.

When a woman breaks the roles and does not respect the rules of the family, her extended family does not respect her anymore and her parents are also less respected by the community.

She also has to face institutional racism when she becomes a mother and later on as she is the one to keep the contact with the school, the health and social services. At the same time, she is sometimes faced with domestic violence exerted by the husband, as a result of unemployment and alcoholism problems.

Moreover, **domestic violence** sometimes occurs in the family, especially when the man wants to prove his social virility and his power as the head of the family. Domestic violence is either a cultural habit or the result of a bad social and economic situation.

Some women accept their condition and are faced with it during their whole life. Nonetheless, the reason for this attitude is often the lack of state remedies in case of domestic violence and

also the image created by the police, which spreads the idea that Roma women are beaten by their husbands in the Romani communities.

It is difficult to prove violence and to encourage the victims to discuss openly about this issue, which does not affect only women, but also in the long run the children who witness it.

The neo - protestant religion started to play an important role in the life of the Roma/Gypsy families. If both sides are belonging to a strong religious group, the violence is often limited. The influence of some religious beliefs could, however, sometimes have a negative impact in the sense that they promote the idea that women are inferior to men.

Trafficking of persons, drug abuse, prostitution.

These phenomena are the results of the economic situation of the women. The smuggling of persons intensified after the failure of communism and the Roma/Gypsy women became an exotic " raw material". Trafficking is not all the time associated with prostitution. It can also be associated with begging on the streets for an income. We should nevertheless bear in mind that measures to combat trafficking should not become a pretext to prevent other migratory movements as it is a different phenomenon.

One characteristic reaction of the Roma/Gypsy community concerning prostitution is to remain silent.

When the issue of prostitution or drug abuse is discussed, in private, it is usually said that "these persons do not belong to our group". Maybe the emerging women's movement will have to face this gruesome reality.

Drug abuse is happening among Roma/Gypsy communities in general and women are affected as consumers or as mothers of drug consumers. Recently, Gypsy women from the Saint-Jacques district in Perpignan (France) demonstrated in the streets against drug consumption, shouting "enough", following the death of one woman from their group.

There is a need to address the root causes for these problems, to tackle the taboo questions and start to work on small pilot projects with open-minded women who are brave enough to do it.

The **economic situation** in many Romani communities is often very bad, and usually the women have to face a lack of income, which can have different causes: the unemployment of the husband, the fact of being alone after a divorce or having a husband in prison. There are some data about the unemployment rate of women from "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and Romania.

In "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" , the total employment rate at the national level is 34,4% (44,6% men and 24,4% women) while the employment rate with the Roma/Gypsy population is 14,1% - 21,5% men and 6,9% women.

In Romania , the total active population of Roma origin is 115.927 while the number of women is 34.564, which means 33,5%.

These data show us:

- The difference in access to employment for the majority women and for the Roma women
- The differences within the Roma/Gypsy population between men and women

Some solutions have been explored to reduce the unemployment of Roma/Gypsy women. They are often related to the social services provided by Roma and non-Roma NGO's, mainly in the fields of education and health. In particular, it appears that posts of social mediators are very appropriate for single women working at the local level and having a sufficient educational level.

Some Roma/Gypsy women are also employed as daily workers in seasonal agricultural work, housekeeping or brick making.

Family planning is also an issue, which has not been discussed at international level; few local projects to promote family planning are being developed and implemented. The refusal to deal with this issue is usually not objectively motivated and the implications of this gap are not discussed and analysed.

The women in post-conflict situations : Roma/Gypsy women are faced with conflicts of different kinds, from the interethnic local conflicts up to wars. These conflicts strengthen the traditional or conservative point of view stating that Roma should not change their traditions and should maintain the Roma communities as closed as possible.

The conflicts prevent the Roma/Gypsy women to get out of their closed worlds; at the same time, they are increasingly forced to develop negotiation skills. Under conflict circumstances, they have to live together with the aggressors and therefore have to find ways in which they can approach the majority population for security and sometimes survival reasons.

6. PROPOSALS FOR SOLUTIONS

In view of the present report, the author proposes the following solutions to be put in practice:

- To create a European working group for the rights of Roma/Gypsy women
- To carry out an in-depth study on the situation of Roma/Gypsy women, putting emphasis on the violations of their rights
- To integrate this issue in the national policies of the member States and on the agenda of the Committee for Gender Equality of the Council of Europe
- To organise round tables with government officials in charge with Roma issues and with male activists to discuss gender equality issues
- To explore the possibilities to create small post-conflict therapy centres
- To include a gender equality component in the training courses for young Roma/Gypsy leaders
- To organise series of seminars on drugs, domestic violence and prostitution
- To set up a partnership among international organisations for the creation of small credit lines for the victims of conflicts and women with special needs taking in account the positive experience carried out by different organisations with women in developing countries