

Ethel Brooks

8 November 2013

Introduction for Session III

Integration of Roma and Sinti with a particular focus on women, youth and children:
Best practices and ways forward

In my scholarly disciplines of Women's and Gender Studies and Sociology, we have developed "intersectional analysis," first used by African-American scholars as a way of understanding the heightened, shifting, forms of marginalization and oppression when race, gender, class and other identities "intersect." The term intersectionality was coined in order to conjure up the image of someone standing in the middle of an intersection, with cars coming from all directions at high speed and at the same time. This is a perfect metaphor for the current situation of Romani women, children and youth –for Roma in general— across OSCE countries.

The intersectional approach also points to the fact that Romani women, Romani children and Romani youth face multiple forms of discrimination –as has been outlined in the UN CEDAW and recognized by the OSCE Parliamentary resolution on promoting policies on equality between Romani women and men. Romani women, in particular, face multiple forms of violence and discrimination, stemming from their gender identities, racial and ethnic identities, and class positions; such violence and discrimination is marked by increased vulnerability to trafficking and sexual violence, domestic violence, and reproductive violence –including forced sterilization. In the Romani community, it is Romani women who often bear the burden of the increase in state-sponsored expulsions and evictions, the building of walls around communities, the lack of water, electricity and social services and the structural violence that comes from a lack of housing and accommodation, infrastructure and social services. Romani women, children and youth –all Romani people—are facing increased extremist violence and hate speech that often goes unchecked and unmarked by the state and the majority population alike. We face higher rates of unemployment, unequal access to education and the continued school segregation that exists in a number of participating states; we face continued discrimination on all fronts, multiplied by racial and ethnic, gender and class identities.

Romani girls, particularly, are the most vulnerable, as has been manifested in the international media frenzy that has circulated around Roma in the past month –the main focus of which was Romani children, Romani youth, and Romani women.

*In mid-October, 15-year-old Leonarda Dibrani, a Romani girl from Kosovo whose family had migrated to France, was pulled from a school trip by the French authorities and deported with her family. After protests by her schoolmates that were echoed across France, the French government offered her the chance to return –without her parents. This is despite reports that the Dibrani family were met with violence from their neighbors upon return to Kosovo.

*The most publicized was the case of Maria, the little blond Romani girl who was taken by the state from her family in Greece on suspicion that she was stolen or trafficked –the suspicion which arose simply because she was deemed too light to belong to a Romani family. After days of speculation and searches for families who had missing children, it was discovered that Maria was a Romani girl from Bulgaria, whose mother –a labor migrant working in Greece—had given her to the Greek family because she could not afford to keep her upon her return to Bulgaria.

*Within days after Maria was taken, an Irish journalist received a Facebook message from a member of the public, expressing concern about a blond haired, blue eyed girl living with a Romani family in Dublin. On this information, the journalist contacted the Irish Gardai (police), who removed the seven-year-old girl from her house. The next day, in another part of the country, the Gardai removed a two-year-old boy from his family. In both cases, DNA tests confirmed that the children belonged to their parents. Currently, the Irish state has another 1-year-old Romanian Romani child in care, and is refusing to allow the mother to return to Romania with the baby –despite a lack of evidence that the child would be endangered after being returned to her mother.

These all point to the continued, sustained racism prevalent, not just in the attitudes of the general public, but in the actions of participating states. They also point to the deep, sustained structural violence experienced by Romani women, children and youth in every corner of the OSCE and beyond. They point to the lack of respect for the integrity of the Romani family on the part of the state, and to violations of the rights of Romani children. Leonarda’s case is just one of many across France and beyond. Maria’s Greek and Bulgarian families are now facing losing their children to their respective states, while Maria herself and her brothers and sisters face the loss of the only families that they have known. The two children taken by the Irish state –without cause—were subjected to unnecessary violence caused by the authorities, echoing a long history, and difficult present, of Romani children taken away from their families by the State. This is damaging for Romani women, children and youth—for all Roma and Sinti across the OSCE region and beyond.

Romani women make up more than half of the Romani population across the OSCE states. The majority of the Roma and Sinti population are under 18 years of age. Demographic data indicate that, currently, 30 % of Roma and Sinti are under 15, while over 50% of the population is under 18 years of age. The average age of the Roma and Sinti population is 24, while the average age in the EU overall is 40. Romani women and youth are the majority; not only are they our future, they are

also our present. Romani women are active members of civil society, are community leaders and participate not only in labor markets, but carry out the work of the home and of citizenship. This should be promoted –with real support of Romani women’s political participation and citizenship practice, as voters, as candidates, as energetic community members and citizens. Romani youth are the ones with the technological capability, the energy, the vision and the drive to take all of us forward. Beyond that, Romani youth should not be considered solely as functions of political economy: Romani youth are rights-bearing subjects, are our visionaries and our activists, and we need to take them seriously as agents and citizens. In order to be taken seriously, participating states should work toward providing equal access to education –from the early years through secondary education and beyond; to ensure inclusion in the decision-making processes regarding all facets of Roma and Sinti policies, practices and programs. Romani women and youth, Romani people, are speaking; we have voices and ideas, and we demand that they be listened to.

We welcome the Ukrainian Chairmanship’s efforts to address the situation of Roma in the OSCE, including at the ministerial level. We look forward to Romani participation in civil society events in Kiev. We hope that the ministerial draft will reflect Romani perspectives from Wednesday’s civil society event, held here at the Hofsburg. In particular, we would like to emphasize the dynamic participation of women and youth, both in civil society and as political and economic agents. As we know, the one draft of the ministerial text includes language around the need to “increase Roma and Sinti motivation” and to promote the development of Roma and Sinti “tradition, abilities and skills.” This language is damaging on a number of fronts: first, Romani women and youth are not only highly motivated, but acting at the forefront of civil society, economic growth and political participation. This needs to be recognized by participating states, while at the same time, the agency that is already existing needs to be promoted, supported, expanded and secured with the support of member states. It is important to remember that the 2003 action plan specified that any policy has to be developed with active participation of Roma and Sinti. Any future commitments have to include the active participation and contribution of Romani women and Romani youth.

The annotated agenda for this session points out, “The OSCE Roma and Sinti Action Plan (Chapter II) recommends active participation of Roma and Sinti as a guiding principle for all decisions that affect their lives and particularly with regard to the design, implementation and evaluation of strategies and action plans. Roma and Sinti should be real and equal partners and share the responsibility for the betterment of their welfare. The Action Plan further recommends the equal participation of Roma and Sinti women in decision-making and policy processes regarding their communities.” Intersectional approaches to participation can point us to the necessity of such equality of decision-making and policy processes on all fronts.

This equal participation is facilitated by access to education, reproductive rights, citizenship, housing, health care, and labor markets. It is facilitated by a recommitment to and redefinition of security for Romani women, Romani children and Romani youth –and for all Roma and Sinti across the region. Security includes freedom from sexual violence and domestic violence, from hate crimes and hate speech, from structural violence and discrimination, and from walls around our neighborhoods and evictions. Equal participation means that there should be no decisions taken, no policies proposed or implemented, without Romani included in the process; as the Action Plan recommends, “For Roma, with Roma.” I want to emphasize its obverse: nothing about us without us. Romani women and Romani youth make up the majority of Roma and Sinti; our rights are central to the securing of the rights of all Roma and Sinti. In turn, Romani people are the largest minority in Europe –we outnumber the population of a number of European nation-states—and our rights are central to securing the rights of all Europeans. Our future is the future of all Roma, of all citizens, across the OSCE region and beyond. Supporting our agency and empowerment through education, enabling our participation and citizenship in all areas through security, and recognizing the crucial work we are doing in all aspects of civil society and beyond, constitute the model of best practice with regard to Romani women, children and youth.

We very much look forward to the upcoming discussion.