

**HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING**  
**(OSCE)**

Within the Roma community, women are the most disadvantaged component, as they face two opposing types of pressure – from the outside taking the form of an obligation to integrate and from the inside taking the form of requests and obligations aimed at the maintenance of the family structure and network .

The living conditions of the Roma populations are deeply changing owing to the multiple forms of influence coming from the contexts in which they settled thereby bringing about the co-existence of new habits and old traditions like for example the need to send the children to school but at the same time employing them in begging to involve them in the economic life of the family.

These contradictions are also influenced by an overt hostility, which often resulted in racist attacks, that endanger especially the projects which invested in the possibility of a co-existence between the needs of the Roma and those of the context in which they live, relying on an encounter devoid of any prejudices that put them in the condition of being able to experience change as a positive element.

According to various pieces of research changes largely depend on the policies of the areas where the communities live.

It was found that the housing policies that implied the transfer of a number of Roma groups from the camp to proper housing not only brought about an improvement of living conditions but also triggered identity mechanisms among the Roma who were able to couple their sense of belonging with the need to adjust to the habits of other families.

Furthermore when public policies were aimed at strengthening the opportunities offered to women, the results have been largely positive. Whenever the access of women to services was eased (through the employment of Roma women mediators at medical facilities; through targeted prevention pathways or through the activities of social secretariats at camps, etc.), whenever the training of women and support to their working activities were emphasized, whenever the decision making power of women within the family and the group was strengthened through the allocation of housing and public utilities, women themselves have promoted innovative elements and brought about a synthesis between their own context and the recipient environment.

In short, whenever the opportunities offered to women have been strengthened they have begun to accompany the entire Roma community towards a progressive integration pathway; it therefore appears appropriate that local administrators and associations of the private social sector act in this direction, without forgetting that each intervention should be included in a comprehensive and consistent framework.

The discrimination that affects Roma women is even more strengthened by the co-existence of elements linked to the ethnic group they belong to on the one hand and to gender discrimination on the other. Despite the lack of statistical data, European experts largely agree on discrimination phenomena concerning access to education, to the labour market, to medical services and to housing.

Throughout Europe, the situation of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (RSC) continues to be characterized by discrimination, social exclusion and extreme poverty. On a national level, the need was felt, and not only on an impulse of the European Union, to adopt a Strategy aimed at guiding an inclusion activity of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti, over the next few years, finally overcoming the emergency phase which characterized this type of activity over the last few years especially in large urban areas.

In connection with specific projects of promotion of a network of cultural-linguistic RSC mediators, the national Strategy envisages the programming and implementation of a training cycle addressing 100 RSC women aiming at bringing about a participation process of women, in a gender dimension, as well as at favouring more social and employment inclusion for women themselves.

**The access to the labour market** is adversely affected by the extremely low level of education of women, by their frequent pregnancies and by the male chauvinism of many communities, which force women not to accept any employment as an alternative to the work to be carried out within the community itself.

As far as Roma women are specifically concerned, the priority objective of the Strategy is developing individual support pathways towards the labour market as well as supporting the access of RSC under 35 to the system of opportunities and eased conditions envisaged for the setting up of enterprises for the young and more generally for youth employment.

Employment is the cornerstone for the success of any inclusion policy, capable of finally countering any prejudice based attitude towards RSC communities. Over the last few years very few attempts were made at the inclusion of Roma in employment within labour circles other than their traditional activities. Many of them have encountered difficulties in connection with inclusion in employment. In Lombardia the experience of "Valore Lavoro" show interesting indications such as, for example, the creation of new inclusion pathways for young people and women, including of a self-employment type, with the support of adequate vocational training and the awareness raising of employment guidance services. In addition to efforts towards the promotion of self employment, the fundamental role of the full access to all opportunities existing on the labour market must be brought to the forefront by developing accompanying pathways towards subordinate employment that imply mediation among institutions, services of guidance to work, members of the social sector and of the third sector, communities, families and all actors that actively participate in the pathways of training and of employment inclusion.

In connection with the employment inclusion of these communities, successful projects have been carried out, such as the "WORKSHOP OF ARTIFACTS BY ROMA WOMEN", in which the aim is cancelling the social-working discrimination of the Roma population and of Roma women in particular. This intervention, which enabled the setting up of a sound based working group of Roma women who manage (and this is innovative) a small scale workshop for the manufacturing of original artifacts for the home and for clothing, has acted on a whole series of aspects ranging from training to inclusion in the social texture; from the support to the family to aggregation in terms of an opportunity of dialogue and interaction. The working group is based on the positive and equal cooperation between the Roma women and the women of the "Insieme Zajedno" Association, and it became a place for cultural exchange and a means to provide support in meeting the difficulties encountered by Roma women on their path in the world outside Roma Camps. The ability in craftsmanship, the imagination and skills of Roma women are enhanced through common work which becomes an opportunity, commitment, responsibility, autonomy, individual self-esteem as well as opportunity to communicate and improve the ability to make one's own choices.

The Taivè dressmaker/ironing shop project of Caritas Ambrosiana is an attempt at integration and women's empowerment within the Milan Roma community. It began in 2009 and it employs 8 women fully complying with the relevant labour regulations. The project was made possible thanks to the contribution over time of various public institutions and institutions of the private social sector.

**Access to education:** The inadequate level of the average education of citizens of RSC origin is one of the main causes of their precarious living conditions and of the difficulties encountered in having access to the labour market. The low educational level of Roma women is linked not only to a form of discrimination coming from the outside of the community (which does exist but which affects males and females to the same extent), but also and especially to the norms and traditions of many communities that force girls to leave the school very early (in any case before 12 years of age) to take on the traditional roles within the community (early marriages, care of relatives...). One of the main objectives of the Strategy is increasing the access and participation in the national educational system as well as the educational level of both young people and adults, with special reference to women.

In connection with the promotion of the governance of policies and of instruments aiming at social inclusion and countering discrimination against RSC women, the testing of training pathways aimed at mediation are envisaged to favour the supply-demand relation, including through the involvement of Roma men and women mediators in key contexts, such as the school, laying special emphasis on the involvement of Roma women.

The key conditions for the success of the training activities include the enhancing of best practices in schools and the support to the activities of teachers, in concertation with local authorities and associations active at local level.

**Access to medical services:** A national inclusion strategy for RSC cannot be effective without taking in consideration all aspects and issues adversely affecting the access to socio-medical services by this sector of the population.

However, various socio-cultural and psychological factors count among the causes of a limited access to the National Health Service on the part of Roma women, including the request of medical assistance only in case of an acute illness, the lack of understanding of the importance of both screening tests and prevention of diseases, the fear of the social stigma linked to the violation of deep-rooted traditions and cultural codes, the low level of attention paid to one's own health condition and domestic violence.

Despite a very advanced protective legal framework, the RSC communities continue to encounter difficulties or discrimination in their search for health. Like all other citizens, Rom and Sinti who are regular residents must comply with the obligation to register with the National Health Service, furthermore they are entitled to an equal treatment and to equal rights and duties – a condition that must be fully enforced.

Third country nationals who therefore are not citizens can also have access to medical services. The persistence of prejudices, wrong beliefs and communication barriers increase the distance between RSC and services.

The National Health Service explicitly guarantees the social protection of pregnancy and maternity on an equal footing with Italian woman citizens in public and accredited health facilities and it guarantees urgent and/or essential treatment in outpatient clinics and hospitals.

**Access to housing:** The lack of lodging and housing discomfort are perhaps the most extreme examples of poverty and social exclusion in society. The release from camps as a place of physical and relational decay of families and persons of RSC origin and their resettlement in dignified lodgings is possible , although experience shows the complexity of the actions needed to favour the transition and to manage the change of the housing habits of the concerned persons.

In the course of time numerous attempts have been made at overcoming the logic of camps following diversified experiences and proposals in terms of housing and there have been many best practices. For years also the main Roma and Sinti associations and federations, like the majority of associations that operate for their inclusion, have been asking for an overcoming of the “system of nomad camps”.