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*Roma women as a part of decision-making mechanism*

My name is Miradija Jovanovic. I'm an independent Roma rights activist working in Kosovo. I come from the Roma community and my cast is kovachi (blacksmith). I am active since 2003 in the Civil Society sector and the NGO sector. I have worked for many international human rights organizations. My work is always with the women of non-majority communities: Kosovo Roma, Kosovo Ashkali and Kosovo Egyptians. To date I have interviewed more than 700 women throughout Kosovo. I can say that the situation of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian women in Kosovo is very bad. There are very few women who are active in public life. In some ways, they don't have freedom of speech; from early age they are raised to listen to older people in the family and to become a good homemaker, a good mother, and a good wife. They drop out of school for many different reasons and never go back. Later they marry and have children and that is that.

Regarding public participation: Recently I was employed by OSCE mission in Kosovo to work on research about the implementation of Local Action Plan 2010-2015 for the integration of the Kosovo Roma, Kosovo Ashkali and Kosovo Egyptian communities in Kosovo. I was covering two municipalities and one of them was Kosovo Polje. I was very surprised to find out how little the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians were involved in creating the Local Action Plan which had the aim to improve the living standards of these three communities in Kosovo. The municipality had to have a member of the three communities participating when the municipality drafted and endorsed the Local action Plan. But women were not involved at all, zero women from the three communities. When I was doing research and asked the women about the Local Action Plan, they didn't even know what it was, and they didn't know what the document meant. They were totally out of the picture. In Kosovo, we have only one woman from the Ashkali community who is politically active she works in the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport. Only two women one from the Roma, the other from the Ashkali community have their own NGOs and they are doing very good work. That is all there is regarding public participation. Something has to change tremendously in society so these numbers can increase. Municipalities have to pay more attention to the women from the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities.

Regarding employment, the employment of women in the three communities is very low. Only one woman from the Kosovo Ashkali community works at the municipal level. Only one. The general situation of employment is very bad but municipalities must give the first chance to the non-majority communities before the others if they want to respect the Local Action Plan and the strategy of integration of Kosovo Roma, Kosovo Ahkali and Kosovo Egyptians. In the municipality of Kosovo Polje, the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians make up about 13% of population and their employment at the municipal level for the moment is just three people. In this municipality the unemployment of Roma Ahkali and Egyptian communities goes as high as 95%. Those who can fulfill the criteria, those who are eligible, receive social assistance. But recently, new amendments to the law have affected many Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian families. The criteria got much more difficult to fulfill and many families had to leave the system. No work, no social assistance, no money. Children drop out of school so they can help their parents to make money for the family. The work is collecting scrap paper, metal, and plastic. The children also beg in the street and they become street children instead of school children.

Girls drop out of school to look after younger brothers and sisters so parents can go out to find work. My biggest worry is about how much longer this will go on and on. How much longer these three communities will live in extreme poverty.

My recommendation to OSCE:

1. Please advise your OSCE state and their ministries of education to please make an amendment in their law for education to make HIGH SCHOOL mandatory. In this way we will have Romani women educated, and their position will be better in public life. As we know, they have very small incomes. If there was a fine for not finishing school, the Roma would not be able to afford to pay the fines, and therefore they would have to finish school. In this way we will also lower the number of early marriages.
2. Make the inclusion of Roma and Sinti women mandatory at municipal and governmental levels and in decision-making mechanisms.
3. Please advise your OSCE states who have Roma and Sinti populations to please let the Roma draft and create any documents which have something to do with Roma; let the Roma prioritise their own needs, because they know best what they need most. Ensure women's participation.
4. Ensure the implementation of any Action Plan regarding Roma Sinti issues. Advise your state to ensure the funds for the implementation of the same.
5. Advise your states to prioritise Roma and Sinti, especially women, when comes to employment at municipal and governmental levels.
6. Advise your states to always come with Roma Sinti representatives to any such related event.
7. Support the use of Romani language in public institutions in your states.