

Roma and Sinti Women Empowerment Day

To tackle the social exclusion of Europe's largest minority requires an understanding of the problems Roma face and the dedication to solve them.

And it requires both a sense of urgency to act and a perspective of concrete opportunities for progress. It also requires the political will and to overcome political discontinuity.

The endeavor of dealing with the phenomenon of Roma and Sinti inclusion becomes even more challenging when it comes to Romani and Sinti woman. Their situation is best described as multiple discrimination. Multiple discrimination is a sensitive, invisible and often misunderstood issue.

Romani rights have been discussed at length for numerous years, but issues such as violence against Romani women, trafficking, and gender discrimination were always left on the back-burner. The situation changed with the initiation of dialogues between international human rights and multilateral organizations, mostly within the European Union, including the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and some other international organizations. Initiatives such as the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005 – 2015 played crucial role in fostering commitments of governments toward the Roma integration. Lately the EU with its Framework for the National Roma Integration Strategies is playing strong role in this process.

Although European Union defends inclusion, ongoing remedial efforts are not taking place and special attention to Romani and Sinti women's issues simply missing from most of the National Roma Action Plans. Neither the real mechanism for consultation with the Roma civil society exists nor the coordination of Member States by EU is proving results, mostly due to the lack of expertise.

We need to support the mutual learning mechanisms and the identification and promotion of good practices in the policy areas. We need to straighten our focus on the local level, where the real inclusion is taking place.

The challenge, besides actually challenging the prejudices and stereotypes - in the Roma inclusion process, is the involvement of the local institutions. The Framework for the NRIS has stress out that the implementation lies at the regional and local level, though non (or very few) of the local authorities were involved in the process of drafting these strategies. In the same time the local advocacy groups are out of the process. Attempts of improving living conditions of Roma will only succeed if Roma are participating as full citizens in equal stakeholdership.

It is of utmost importance to address Roma inclusion, specifically Romani and Sinti women, and to promote equal citizenship in the future programming across the European Structural Funds.

Future Structural Funds should support local Romani women activists to create bottom-up pressure and to empower them to set up relations between Roma communities and local administration. Roma on the local level, supported by ESF, need to be provided expertise, skills and tools and with some basic financial resources. But beyond training the future approach should enlarge its scope of capacity building also to institutional and networking support. Also the cooperation between Roma and non-Roma organizations should be enhanced.

Moreover, national governments, including the European Commission should support public awareness campaigns in order to challenge anti-Roma sentiment as it is important to prepare the ground and to target the majority population in positive manners especially now during the economic crisis, when Roma are first to be blamed. In a climate of increasing intolerance and socio-economic problems, social inclusion strategies cannot succeed without resolute action to combat anti-Gypsyism.

European Structural Funds should focus on the training, support and mobilization of grassroots women activists and youngsters – both Roma and non-Roma - from teenagers to university students. Young Roma men and women have the potential to explore different ways to challenge negative stereotypes; they can easily enter into dialog with (local) authorities and generate public attention. But still, especially being from the Roma community, it is important to give (young) Roma women the confidence to play an active role. Continuous coaching and supporting is intensive but bears fruits. In the end, we have found that it makes sense to go the extra mile to mobilize and empower communities, especially young individuals, even if it means you have to build their capacity from scratch. Moreover, this is the surest route to achieving something lasting since those involved can continue to apply the knowledge they gained and even share it and utilize the wider network they become part of.

One of the guiding principle of the ERGO Network to work towards encouraging the *Roma themselves to take an active role to accomplish equal citizenship as a shared responsibility of all - of Roma and other citizens.*

Along with this principle, ERGO Network is implementing a project “*Empowerment Campaign for Roma women*”¹ that aims to empower and boost the visibility of grassroots Roma women to become equal citizens in Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Turkey through a region-wide campaign. The campaign starts from the belief that women themselves play a key role in challenging and changing negative attitudes. It is offering a platform for Roma women to express their common voice and share the responsibility to find solutions and advocate towards authorities. The campaign named “our place, our space, our case” uses a bottom-up approach, with an overall message and branding, implemented at grassroots level.

Support for such programs that are aiming to empower Roma and to increase the capacity to raise awareness about Roma issues in general and Roma women in particular are hard to find among the existing EU and national grant schemes. This project is supported by IPA program directed to the accessing countries only, therefore we pledge that such support will be available in the next budgeting period 2013-2020.

Additional note:

Grassroots Roma women, in fact, are the ones who care for their families and communities. Roma women tend to be locally oriented and thus are mostly interested in their direct living environment. Unlike Roma youth and male leaders, it takes more time and efforts to encourage them to become active on regional or national level, due to their daily responsibilities and the fact their families do not always allow them to travel for meetings and events.

Experience has shown that in order to activate Roma women a local club or meeting place is indispensable. Here women can meet away from their homes and discuss issues that concern them. Through exchanging experience among each other, lobby and advocacy can develop naturally. This

¹ In 2010, ERGO Network and Spolu International Foundation merged into a single legal entity. Spolu International Foundation has over 15 years of professional expertise in Roma emancipation and capacity building.

project is encouraging local Roma women groups to gain support of local administration to assure a meeting place.

The gap between the few 'elite' Roma women engaged on regional, national and even international level and their grassroots peers is wide. Linking grassroots Roma women to their more educated and elite peers is a method to bridge this gap. The **Roma Women Brokers** of this project function as bridges between the grassroots groups and the broader society (Roma movement, other women groups, local and national authorities and other organizations/ institutions).

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