



The right to health: Challenges for Roma Women

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Contribution to the 11th International Women Health Meeting (IWHM)
Brussels, 13 – 17 September 2011

The majority of people hold an imprecise image of Romani culture. Many still don't know about the actual values contained in Romani lives, and they attribute traditions to the Roma that in reality do not characterize them.

Let me start by pointing out that Roma are extremely diverse, based on origin, language, religion, and occupation. Romani identity, as it is known in the present, began to take shape after the Romani departure from India. Romanis were absorbing new peoples and languages. While some Roma in some countries are nomadic, most in Central and Eastern Europe have settled over time. The isolation of traveling groups of people created cultural values and family ties that are very strong, and which in many cases remained unchanged for centuries.

The mobilization of the Roma in the wake of Central-Eastern Europe's transition towards democracy in 1989 brought the violation of their human rights to the attention of the European Community. It resulted in the creation of specific provisions for and a general recognition of the Romani people. Within this process, a new social category of "Romani women" emerged out of the overall category, which was a prerequisite for a project attempting to define Romani women's identity and social role. This aim was pushed forward by human rights activists and adopted by the EU authorities. We understand this positive differentiation trend as being parallel with the general gender consciousness awakening in Central and Eastern Europe in the last decade of the 20th century. Since then, there have been certain signs testifying to improvements in the Romani women's situation, while the most urgent issues still need to be tackled.

Discrimination is a regular feature of the daily life of the Roma. General antipathy and exclusion from majority society is manifested in a lack of access to employment, housing, health care, and restriction from restaurants, sports facilities and other public spaces. Romani women have to face difficulties to an even greater extent than their male counterparts.

Their situation is best described as triple discrimination. They are women in a still largely male-dominated East-Central European societies, members of an ethnic minority threatened by increasing violence from majority society, and also female members of the highly traditional Romani communities. The triple discrimination is a sensitive, invisible and misunderstood issue, almost reminding us of Betty Friedan's "problem without a name" in her *Feminine Mystique*¹.

¹ Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* describes the situation of US women in the 1950s. It shows their lack of self-fulfillment and identity, created by an ideology of women seen only as wives and mothers. According to

The endeavor of dealing with this phenomenon becomes even more challenging for a Romani woman, once she decides to become an activist. We believe, however, that it is of utmost importance to motivate Roma people in general, and Romani women in particular, to become involved in public life, learn new professional skills and build their self-confidence, if things are to change for the better. That is why Romani women have to study and understand their position, and be able to analyze it well.

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 is playing strong role in this process.

Although European Union defends inclusion, ongoing remedial efforts require special attention and the coordination of Member States policies on education, employment and social protection to ensure the mutual learning and identification of good practices in the policy areas. In the promotion and implementation of rights for ethnic minorities – participation in political life and the specific focus on the full-scale integration of Roma is the European Union playing the most important role. On the one hand it is taking Member States to task when they fail to meet their obligations, and on the other assisting them to coordinate their efforts to promote Roma integration and to defend human rights. Beside mentioned priorities, marginalization, segregation and health risks need to be overcome in order to ensure the fundamental rights.

Roma women roles

Since the beginning the majority of leadership positions in political negotiation were, however, occupied by men, and thus every agenda has been connected with universal (i.e. male) issues. Romani women fight hard to find their place in the field of the human rights movement, advocating the end of gender discrimination in their community by gaining the support of Romani men and mainstream society for their plight. On the other hand, however, they need to simultaneously preserve the traditions and cultural values of Romani identity. Another type of challenge is the field of global women's rights. In the general discourse of women's human rights, there has not been much focus, especially in Europe on minority women and the violation of their rights, such as early marriages or the very sensitive issue of reproductive rights and forced sterilization. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were first positive steps in recognising the gender dimension of racial discrimination.

Traditional culture and its rules sharply influence a Romani woman's life. From childhood, she is educated to live in respect to her parents and her husband. These rules are very strong in some communities. "Many times, when a Romani girl reaches the age of eleven or twelve, her parents pull her out of the school, because she might learn 'bad things' there. Among other things, parents are concerned that there are evil boys who hang around the schoolyard. In some regions, it is very important that a bride remains a virgin until the first marriage night. In the past there has been already stimulated a discussion on this matter foster by Romani girls and women, yet this tradition keeps its place. 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

social conventions, they were not allowed to articulate their real needs. Similarly, within the Romani community, the limits given by the traditional view on family are restricting women to speak out about their problems, similarly to those given by US society.

also less respected by the community. The gender role division in the Romani family is very sharp, but the woman is the one whose duties are much harder. In some very traditional communities, the relationship might seem archaic. The task of the Romani woman is to take care of children, to maintain the household, and to hold together the extended family. There is little chance to escape this circle, and at some times Roma women also face domestic violence.

In some Romani communities, early marriage remains as a conservative tradition unchanged for centuries. For example, in the Suto Orizari municipality, the biggest Romani community in Macedonia, the participation of Romani girls and boys in primary school begins to be unequal in higher grades. Romani girls are obliged to help in the house or to get married at a very young age, from 12-17 years. In Hungary, Romani speaking groups such as Kalderasha and Lovara² also marry at a younger age. According to their tradition, the concept of a Marriage Bond is nothing else but the manifestation of the will of the groom's parents aiming to establish matrimony. Parents choose the best husband or wife for their children. If a Romani girl wants to leave the community and realize herself, she would not be allowed to do so.

Once a Romani woman decides to go down her own path, for instance when she wants to get an education and continue further with a career, she faces many obstacles. A great example is a comparison between two Czech Romani women of Vlachika origin.³ One of them, *Margita*, decided to leave her family, gain an education and continue with a career as educationalist. Once she said that, she lost the connection with her family. The reason is that she went against the family rule, which says that Romani girls have to stay home and take care of the family. Nevertheless, the personal interview showed that she achieved what she desired – education and a position in society. Moreover, her family started speaking with her again, later on in the course of her life. She feels happy and after years she is having her own family.

The other story is about *Lenka*, who decided to stay at home, raise children, and take care of her husband and extended family. She is a very good singer, and so she sings at family celebrations and enjoys the traditional atmosphere. She feels happy because she was taught that this is her role, even though she sometimes thinks to be a professional singer, the pressure of family is so strong that she will stay within the conforming lifestyle.

Domestic violence also sometimes occurs in Romani families, especially when the man wants to prove his social position and his power as a breadwinner. Domestic violence is either a cultural habit or the result of bad social and economic problems, which, together with alcoholism, lead to aggression and further violence. Unfortunately, the issue stays within the family and due to the lack of state remedies and also the negative image created by the police, which spread the stereotype of Roma women beaten by their husbands in the Romani communities.

Only education is increasing the chances of breaking the cycle of poverty and exclusion. However, it is a focus of tension, and some Roma are afraid that being educated means losing their identity. In some places, stereotypes still remain that keep the Roma from achieving a better life. Once a Roma woman has a higher level of education, she becomes a positive role model for members of her family, as well as for her community.

Roma women are playing a crucial role as mediators between Roma and the institutions of the majority society, including schools. Romani women are going outside the community to earn money, and to deal with the education of their children. With the aim to increase the education of women, international organizations are networking women's groups in order to motivate

² Romani speaking groups, more likely to live in settlements, and work traditional occupations.

³ Vlachike Roma came to the Czech Republic from Romania, and brought along their tradition, language, customs, values and philosophy. They manage to retain their tradition, as distinct from other Roma groups that left behind their tradition completely and adapted to new conditions. (Reichová 44 –46)

them to realize projects on a local level and build their capacity. The crucial roles in the process of emancipation and education are having community centers and women's groups. These are building a better environment for the Roma, and encouraging Romani women to become educated and active members of society, and to make a political lobby for their rights.

This contribution draws on Gabriela Hrabanova's thesis „Roma Women's Initiatives after 1999“, realized in the Anglo-American University in Prague, Czech Republic.