

8th International Roma women's conference

Protecting the human rights
and dignity of Roma
and Traveller women
in times of crises



Organised by the Roma and Travellers Team,
Council of Europe, the Ministry of Labour
and Social Affairs, North Macedonia
and Roma and Traveller civil society organisations

REPORT
by **Nesime Salioska**
General Rapporteur

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24-26 November 2021

Organised by the Roma and Travellers Team,
Council of Europe, the Ministry of Labour
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Council of Europe

¹ The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

French edition:
*8^e conférence internationale
des femmes roms
Protéger les droits fondamentaux
et la dignité des femmes des
communautés de Roms et de Gens
du voyage en temps de crise*

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1. Introduction

The current COVID-19 situation has brought to light many systemic and structural failings that protect Roma and Traveller women and girls, highlighting also the ambient antigypsyism and anti-nomadism which in many countries are manifesting themselves as racist actions towards Roma and Travellers.

The 8th International Roma Women's Conference "PROTECTING THE HUMAN RIGHTS AND DIGNITY OF ROMA AND TRAVELLER WOMEN IN TIMES OF CRISES" examined whether intergovernmental co-operation and existing National Roma Inclusion Strategies support the measures taken by national authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The conference aimed to provide answers to the three main questions:

1. How should the Council of Europe, member states and civil society target the specific needs of women and girls by developing Roma and Traveller women and girls gender equality related thematic work in the member states?
2. Which priorities should be put forward to ensure that Roma and Traveller women and girls are not left behind but can equally benefit from the on-going and future crisis mitigation efforts?
3. How can civil society organisations in general, and Roma and Traveller women's civil society organisations in particular, influence the advancement of gender equality and of gender mainstreaming?

Approximately 120 participants participated physically and online. They represented Roma and Traveller women's civil society organisations and networks; gender equality rapporteurs; members of national parliaments and other elected officials; representatives of governmental authorities or agencies; representatives of European Institutions or Agencies and of other International Organisations; as well as academia.

The conference was enriched by confident and dedicated Roma and Traveller women who delivered excellent presentations and spoke with the voice of vulnerable groups from the community to bring better understanding of the emerging needs and issues, which unfortunately have developed and deepened existing inequalities in an uncontrolled way due to the COVID-19 health crisis. Likewise, compelling presentations by some men, clearly expressed their understanding of gender equality as a concept from which the whole community and society, including men themselves will benefit.

On 24th November, during the conference, **the Slovak Government adopted a resolution** and formally apologised for the coercive sterilisation of socially-disadvantaged women in the years 1966-1989, among which Roma women were the most affected. The resolution is to be followed-up by a compensation mechanism. Human rights organisations have had for years been demanding that Slovakia admit to the systematic human rights violations as it symbolises a reconciliation effort and positive expression towards marginalised communities.

2. General observations and conclusions

According to Roma and Traveller women their main challenge at the moment is the fact that manifestations of systemic and institutional racism during the global pandemic have intensified and overlapped with intersectional discrimination. Roma and Traveller women and girls' vulnerabilities are mainly based on unequal access to basic and specialised health care services and generally poor living conditions. Poor accommodation is specifically problematic when children have to access classes online remotely, while living in overcrowded spaces. This worsens the inequality of education. During the lockdown, many Roma and Traveller women and girls, whose homes are not safe, have become more exposed to domestic violence. As a result of ethnic stigma, the amplitude of violence was and remains unreported and invisible while COVID-19 has become the leading cause of institutional unresponsiveness.

Roma and Traveller women and girls continue to face many social barriers and prejudices which do not allow them to participate in public life. They continue to be underrepresented in the local, national and international political structures and decision-making processes.

Although there is a systematic approach to overcome employment issues in the Balkan region and in Europe, analysis shows that it should be constantly upgraded and adjusted to the specific needs.

Responsibility for respecting human rights is twice as high in pandemic times. Challenges at policy level are not only related to the gaps in the implementation and the allocation of funds of the existing ones but can also be linked to inefficient government structures.

Conclusion 1: Making progress towards greater inclusion of Roma and Traveller women and girls is not only a human rights imperative, it is a key component of how countries can respond to the challenges they face.

As part of this discussion it was concluded that most importantly no country in Europe has an accurate number of its Roma and Traveller citizens according to the official census. Many Roma do not officially register their ethnicity as they are afraid of discrimination, long-standing assimilation pressures, and lack of information on the benefits of registration. Some are still left without civil status and documentation and struggle to prove or gain nationality in the countries in which they live. This all leads to the creation of "invisible" citizens, legally defined as stateless or persons living without IDs. Recognition of their existence and addressing their challenges is one of the ways to move forward since many of them cannot access education, health services, social benefits, and employment opportunities. In addition, whenever an integration policy is established, indicators cannot be fully effective, outcomes cannot be properly predicted or quantitatively measured without this kind of data. In relation to this issue, factors of gender discrimination can also be seen as causes and consequences of Roma statelessness. The first risk of statelessness is the lack of birth certification due to the lack of documentation of the mother. It is essential to ensure equal parental rights for all women regardless of whether they have identification documents themselves.

”Certain pandemic challenges can be tackled much more easily if there is an existing system which addresses the demands and needs of citizens”¹

¹ Statement by Jagoda Sahpaska, Minister of Labor and Social Policy of North Macedonia

Conclusion 2: Mainstream society and states need to see young Roma and Traveller women and girls not as a threat or a burden, but as a huge untapped potential. This approach will support more vibrant young women to be part of diverse societies and to contribute to their development.

The main challenge of Roma and Traveller young women and girls can initially be seen as the absence of their needs in policy documents while at the same time they lack political education. Roma and Traveller young women's needs are related to their access to rights, tools and provision of equal opportunities as a way to invest back to their communities.

Young Roma and Traveller women and girls who lack opportunities of equal participation both in their own community and in the wider society; whose capacities are not resourced even though they are highly educated, usually migrate to seek better opportunities elsewhere, instead of accessing employment opportunities in local or national governments. Their potential should be used not only to provide new kind of initiatives for economic development of their communities but more importantly to introduce diversity, avoid homogenous structures and illustrate openness by the society for persons with different backgrounds. It was emphasised that the best tool to fight against stereotypes and prejudices is by embracing them, meaning an open space for discussions around stereotypes is needed as by hiding from them taboos are created.

” The young people (women) of today are the leaders and influencers of tomorrow.”²

Conclusion 3: We need to fight absolute poverty in all its aspects to empower Roma and Traveller women to access the labour market so that they become more economically independent as individuals and at community level and also more resilient to domestic violence.

In relation to this conclusion we must not forget the ones who fall through the net of the educational system and who do not have an opportunity to access proper education and who, due to the lack of support and information, do not manage to exit the cycle of intergenerational poverty, still live in poor living conditions and in homes which do not satisfy the minimum requirements such as lacking electricity, running water, and a toilet or a bathroom. As a result, many escape dire circumstances and become asylum seekers with a focus on those from non-EU countries. As a consequence, another generation of Roma and Traveller women and girls is lost since many of them abandoned education as children.

Generally, the high unemployment rate puts Roma and Traveller women at risk of working in the informal economy and eventually the inability to access pension and social security rights. Roma women are currently mostly employed in the informal sector, in jobs such as scrap, paper and metal collecting, flower selling and cleaning. As nearly all their jobs require public space and social interaction, during the times of social distancing measures and lockdowns their sources of income decreased or stalled entirely. Additionally, most Roma and Traveller women are not informed about business application procedures; they do not know how to promote their work and how the labour market works in terms of digitalisation, social networks and online platforms.

The National Traveller Women's Forum in Ireland have been advocating at national level to introduce a National Traveller Employment and Enterprise Strategy that will help to improve employment opportunities for Traveller women. However, it needs to be resourced since funding is still lacking.

Governments must work with employers in the public and private sectors to open doors for real employment opportunities for Roma and Traveller women.

” Roma women have ideas, they are creative, but they need to be taught how to realise them and how to move from the informal to the formal sphere of work.”³

² Conclusion from the workshop on Youth Activism, Rapporteur, Berill Baranyai (Portugal), ADI ROM Rapporteur on Roma and Traveller youth

³ Conclusion from the workshop on Employment, Rapporteur: Ana Sacipovic, Association of Roma Women Osvit, Serbia

Conclusion 4: We need to see at member state level more pragmatic and harmonised gender, health and educational policies which can respond to individuals' needs with positive narratives around women and girls instead of generalised approaches which do not always reach the most affected; i.e. socially disadvantaged/discriminated women and girls.

Roma and Traveller women and girls may not have access to reproductive and sexual rights and information, they lack education on family planning, in particular in relation to the usage of contraceptive means, and often do not send their children to kindergarten. All of these factors strengthen gender inequality while women's participation is restricted, including the fact that they have no income or property. On the one side high fertility rates are noted, but on the other side infant mortality is also high, as a result of late or irregular check-ups during pregnancy, as well as negligence during childbirth and post-natal care, which reveals the low quality of health services provided by some healthcare providers with hidden negative attitudes. Evidence proves that Roma and Traveller women and girls who visit family practice centers or hospitals are kept waiting, ignored, not given enough attention or sometimes entirely rejected by health personnel. This situation not only increases Roma and Traveller women's and girls' physical problems but mental ones as well.

Despite the increasing evidence demonstrating the link between poor health and COVID-19 fatalities, Roma and Travellers in some states have not been prioritised in national vaccination strategies and have lower access to COVID-19 vaccination and testing services.

Talking about education, deprivation is not only linked to formal classes but also to provision of meals, after school lessons and other activities; as well as access to electronic devices and internet access. Also, the increasingly worse economic situation does not allow many Roma and Traveller families to prioritise their children's education. Limited or lack of access to digital learning especially puts the girls at risk of school dropout and increases their likelihood of falling victim to early marriages. When only one digital device is available in the household, it was reported that often times boys were given the priority to use them. In particular, concerning the education of Traveller children in Ireland, the historical context of Traveller only classes in mainstream schools were mentioned.

The Roma and Traveller LGBTI women's key message in the conference is that they exist. They are a clear example of the intersecting issues of gender, race, nationality, class and minority sexual existence. There is constant discrimination and neglect of Roma and Traveller LGBTI women's position within Roma, feminist and LGBTI movements.

”Policies are gender blind and research on intersectional discrimination of Roma and Traveller women carried out by Roma and Traveller is lacking. It is also very important to work inside the communities to reduce sexism and patriarchy thinking and relationship”⁴

Conclusion 5: We need better alignment of social and environmental policies to tackle racism , as well as to provide adequate infrastructural services and improve living conditions and temporary halting sites/permanent trailer sites in general.

The lack of basic infrastructural services to households is mainly due to the fact that they are located in non-urbanised parts of towns, which is augmented by environmental racism. Communities are seen as environmentally problematic and are disconnected or not provided with public environmental services such as waste collection. Sometimes they have no other choice but to live and/or work in polluted sites including landfills, contaminated industrial sites, or in areas prone to environmental hazards such as floods. Forced evictions are also common as Roma and Traveller have little legal protection or access to legal recourse against them.

⁴ Conclusion from workshop on Intersectional Romani Feminism, Rapporteur, Kateryna Levchenko, Vice-President of the Council of Europe Gender Equality Commission (GEC), Ukraine

Environmental racism disproportionately affects Roma and Traveller women and girls since they are often the caretakers and provide for meals, drinking water and cleaning among other household chores. They are more susceptible to suffer from environmental issues especially when pregnant. For example, women and girls must often cross busy roads or other areas to fetch water.

” Non-communicable as well as communicable diseases are part of their daily struggle due to environmental racism.”⁵

⁵ Conclusion from workshop on Environmental Racism, Rapporteur, Diego Marin, Expert on environmental justice, Project lead on Roma environmental justice, European Environmental Bureau (EEB), Belgium

3. Recommendations

The definition of *empowerment* needs to be clarified. Discussions pointed to the opinion that it means enabling people to strive for power. Addressing discrimination and inequalities faced by Roma and Traveller women and girls, and bringing them to the forefront of society, will help countries to remedy long-standing issues with which they are confronted such as access to healthcare, housing, education and employment and indirectly cope with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated all these issues. By investing in the rights, skills and opportunities of Roma and Traveller women and girls, countries can consolidate their overall human capital. It is an opportunity to create more inclusive and more diverse societies that we cannot afford to leave untapped. Increased determination to fight violence against women and girls should be the priority objective of all stakeholders as well as coordination of efforts and activities.

Civil society recommendations regarding the work of the Council of Europe

1. Civil society participation is fundamental to democracy and necessitates continuous strengthening and commitment to the work of various structures. As a consequence, it is crucial to create opportunities for a structured dialogue, partnership and other collaborative efforts with Roma and Traveller women organisations;
2. Local governments need secure funding to ensure environmental services, decent housing and green public spaces;
3. It was proposed that the Council of Europe should establish the position of an Antigypsyism Coordinator in order to monitor and guide member states in dismantling structural racism and antigypsyism and take part in the development of the EU Anti-Racism Strategy;
4. The Council of Europe should recommend to member states to improve the living conditions of Roma and Travellers as part of public investments in green technologies;
5. The Council of Europe should recommend to member states to create programmes for the employment of Roma and Traveller women and girls, so that new opportunities are enabled, in particular programmes on Social Enterprise Legislation and Strategies;
6. The Council of Europe should adopt a recommendation on the empowerment of Roma and Traveller women and girls;
7. Roma and Traveller women should be explicitly mentioned in cross-cutting and transversal issues such as gender equality, domestic violence against women, and trafficking in human beings;
8. Roma and Traveller women should be mainstreamed in all strategic action plans affecting them;
9. Traveller women and girls should have better visibility and representation by modifying the name of the IRWC to International Roma and Traveller Women's Conference (IRTWC);

Civil society recommendations regarding the work of the member states

1. Ensure that all Roma are registered in the official state system through national censuses and by introducing procedures for granting citizenship and documentation for those who currently lack them
2. Implement the collection of ethnic data through an equality and a human rights framework that protects the rights of persons documented and ensures communities feel safe being registered.
3. Create conditions and the tools for young Roma and Traveller women and girls to participate in decision-making processes and policy creation, including affirmative actions for their employment or political education;
4. Fight against harmful practices such as arranged/early/child/forced marriages and ensure integration in gender-based and racial violence policies;

5. Actions and funding for social inclusion must be explicitly targeting the community level as a way to fight absolute poverty and inequality;
6. Equal representation of Roma and Traveller women and youth in politics should be enabled through targeted measures and ethnic quotas in local Councils and Parliaments, and gender-sensitive legislation, policies and programmes, and gender budgeting initiatives should be adopted;
7. Enhanced participation should be enabled through mentorship and leadership programmes, formal and informal, career advice, networking and capacity building initiatives, and the promotion of role models;
8. Increased Roma and Traveller women's and girls' participation in policy design and implementation at all levels through the funding of Roma and Traveller Women NGOs to conduct national and international research, including in-depth discussions using intersectional methodology;
9. Women working in art should be supported by national governments, including financially, to facilitate the expression of their work through the introduction of scholarships, training and most importantly – health and pension safety;
10. Training and capacity building for officials and health care providers should be introduced as a way to improve intersectional and intercultural understanding and eliminate stereotypical and discriminatory attitudes;
11. Creating more targeted health programmes for Roma and Traveller women and girls with a focus on sexual and reproductive health;
12. COVID-19 vaccination and testing services need to be made available to Roma and Traveller women and girls without restrictions or delays;
13. Institutional racism in education should be recorded by officials and actions to eliminate it should be taken, ensuring that every child, especially girls, have devices to follow remote classes and can enroll freely;
14. Warrant more opportunities for Roma and Travellers to be trained as teachers and support employment in schools, which is crucial for improving girls' education.

Civil society recommendations regarding the work of the Roma and Traveller and pro-Roma and Traveller Civil Society

1. Increase the visibility and understanding of the need to remove obstacles faced by Roma and Traveller women and girls regarding their residency and documentation status and nationality issues;
2. Provide legal assistance to resolve these issues.
3. Provide support for the establishment of Social Enterprises to enable the legalisation of informal activities which would create security and financial stability for Roma and Traveller women, with a focus on access to working and pension rights;
4. Include an LGBTI dimension in the development of strategic policies and build alliances with other marginalised social groups;
5. Initiate more grass-root activities and mutual collaboration through which Roma and Traveller women will be mobilised and enrolled in integration activities with a focus on gender equality;
6. Strengthen the collaboration between Roma and Traveller women networks.

4. Proceedings

4.1. Opening statements and keynote speeches

Mabera Kamberi, representative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia, also a Member and Gender Equality Rapporteur of the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM) explained that Roma and Traveller women and girls in their daily life find themselves caught between respect for tradition and social expectations regarding gender roles as well as their personal needs. Roma and Traveller women and girls are among the most vulnerable groups. They face multidimensional discrimination and intersectional challenges including early school dropouts, early and forced marriages, forced sterilisation and a high rate of unemployment. She also acknowledged that Roma and Traveller women and girls face many social barriers and prejudices which impact their capacity to participate in public and political life. More precisely, she mentioned that they are underrepresented in local or national political structures and decision-making processes.

Jagoda Shahpaska, Minister of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia, explained that respect for human rights and freedoms is the foundation of democracy in every country. Therefore, the greatest responsibility for respecting the human rights of Roma and Travellers lies within the decision-makers who create public opinions, create policies and measures, but also within the non-governmental sector as a partner in implementation. This responsibility is twice as high in pandemic times. This is why she believes that this conference is of the utmost importance to better tackle the challenges which Roma and Traveller women and girls are faced with in every country.

Latest social reforms in North Macedonia as well as adopted gender policies and laws that systematically protect and support vulnerable groups are in line with the governmental concept “One society for all”. Priorities of Roma women and girls are part of the governmental efforts which can best be illustrated by the development of the special National Action Plan for Roma women and girls 2022-2024.

Bjorn Berge, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe stated that in 2021 this choice of topic could not be more relevant. The Covid-19 pandemic has taken a terrible toll on individuals, communities and countries throughout Europe and around the world. But the nature and severity of the impact has been different.

The Council of Europe recognised early on in the pandemic that minority and vulnerable groups face particular challenges and in extreme cases lack access to adequate health care, which may lead to “inhuman and degrading treatment”. Not taking into account the needs of disadvantaged groups could result in discrimination; and especially vulnerable populations must continue to have access to the rights outlined in the European Social Charter – Rights that range from health to education to housing. He concluded by saying that change for women must be led by women, and that leadership can take many forms. This event is another example of that kind of leadership.

Miranda Vuolasranta, President of the European Roma and Traveller Forum (ERTF) informed the conference that:

Firstly, women still face inequalities in many aspects: extreme poverty, exclusion, low level of education, and unemployment. It is worth to remind that women generally continue to carry an unequal part of family responsibilities. In the case of Roma women, early marriages and births, the number of children, and severely deprived housing conditions make them particularly vulnerable.

Secondly, progress in Council of Europe member states is slow concerning women’s political representation overall, while the representation of Roma women is even worse, as there are currently almost no Roma women elected to national parliaments.

Thirdly, structural violence manifests itself at different levels, from law enforcement officers, social protection services, to shelters supposed to protect from aggressors and perpetrators of violence.

Fourthly, in some Council of Europe member states, political parties have unfortunately used the pandemic to gain political support by blaming the Romani population for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, Roma were banned from entering the hospital, accessing health care services, or from receiving the same support as their fellow citizens.

Fifthly, she stressed that education is a crucial area for progress. However, according to FRA's⁶ "Roma survey – Data in focus" more Roma men (85 %) than women (77 %) say that they can read and write and more Roma women (19 %) than men (14 %) say that they have never been to school.

In conclusion she referred to one of the most visible progresses which started in the early 2000s aiming to present a good practice: namely, when the ERTF adopted its founding constitution, it required that at least 40% of the members are Roma women. Today, 20 years later, the majority of them are women.

Cristina Termizcay, President of the International Roma Women Network "Phenjalipe" greeted the organisers and participants and underlined the need of ensuring that no woman is left behind and unprotected; as well as the hope that the agenda will provide enough space for rich and constructive discussions on all important topics.

Nina Nordström, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Finland to the Council of Europe and Chair of the Committee of Ministers' Rapporteur Group on Human Rights informed the conference that the Steering Committee on Anti-discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion (CDADI) suggested during its second meeting in February to develop a Committee of Ministers' Recommendation to member states on promoting equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls.

Thorsten Afflerbach, Head of Division for the Roma and Travellers Team, Directorate of Anti-Discrimination, Council of Europe, gave an overview of what has happened since the 7th International Roma Women's Conference that took place in 2019 in Helsinki when the participants took stock of the implementation of the Council of Europe's Thematic Action Plan on the inclusion of Roma and Travellers (2016-2019). The challenges of intersectionality, equality, empowerment, access to justice, and participation in political and public life were named as a result from the exercise. These issues were taken as a center count in the two-year follow up.

Eileen Flynn, Senator, Upper House of the Irish Parliament talked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Traveller women in Ireland. Even though the Irish Government sent a message to its people that they are together in this crisis, it seemed they forgot that some people have less resources than others, like it is the case for Roma and Traveller women who are often left behind. 6% of the Traveller and Roma women have been infected, while representing only 1% of the total population.

She underlined that we must not forget Traveller women in prison where they are overrepresented as well as the media attention to Traveller women who broke restrictions; media created a public picture that only Travellers do not follow guidelines.

Some local authorities used the global pandemic to provide basic sanitation services to the Traveller community as a way to protect them from the virus, even though they had been waiting for it for more than 15 years. It took pressure from Traveller organisations to include them in the eviction freeze that was provided to the general population. Yet, some Traveller families received threats of evictions. The impression is that protection afforded to Travellers arrived thanks to the pandemic. The National Traveller Women and Girls' strategy has not been implemented and some local self-governments are not held accountable for that. Ms. Flynn believes that equal representation of minority groups in politics would help in the protection of their rights on a daily basis and not only during the pandemic.

Eglantina Gjermeni, Rapporteur on "Enhancing participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making", former Chair of the Sub-Committee on Gender Equality and former Member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe gave a presentation on positive Roma women role models whom she met, in order to inspire more women and girls to enter politics and participate in decision making processes. However, she pointed out that still the European political landscape remains quite homogeneous. Politics and decision-making seem out of reach to many women of various backgrounds. Some of the obstacles and barriers which she found as crucial are the following: multiple discrimination, weight of prejudice, risk of violence, fear of stigmatisation, barriers within political parties, social pressure, unequal sharing of care responsibilities, lack of accessibility, as well as poor consideration of the skills and expertise of women.

Ms. Eglantina mentioned that she is more than aware that change will happen only if there is political will and commitment to make it happen. A profound change of both mind-sets and political culture is essential to

⁶ Data in Focus Report | The Roma - European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

ensure that political and public decision-making will be more inclusive and accessible for persons from various backgrounds. She concluded that transforming politics and the whole society is a long and challenging process as it is about changing power relations.

4.2. Plenary session 1: How the pandemic has impacted on Roma and Traveller women and girls' health?

Elmas Arus, Chair of the Zero Discrimination Association and Ekin Cuhadar, member of Zero Discrimination Association, Turkey, explained that it has been observed that Roma people are neglected and rejected by health care personnel.

In terms of economic status, they stated that Roma women are mostly employed in the informal sector and that their sources of income disappeared due to social distancing measures and lockdowns. The ones who still have work are the seasonal agricultural workers, however, the increase of labour supply has decreased the daily wages.

While others in society can sustain some kind of socialisation through online platforms, many Roma women do not have this option as their phone lines and internet connections have been cut due to unpaid bills. This situation increases the psychological burden on them. Roma women have little or no trust in the system and institutions and state that "if not the virus, hunger will kill us". Ms. Elmas emphasised that since Turkey had withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention, it is obvious that Roma women are more vulnerable to domestic violence, gender-based violence and femicide.

Radost Zaharieva, Independent expert on Roma health and health inequalities, France explained that Roma women, who are already victims of antigypsyism, are also more vulnerable to face gender-based and racial violence, including human trafficking, which have devastating impact on their health, both physical and mental. Ms. Zaharieva also outlined that increased hate speech against Roma in mainstream and social media have impacted on health services provided to Roma which has resulted in reduced access to reproductive and sexual healthcare services for Roma women and consequently in increased numbers of child marriages and teenage pregnancies.

Mary Brigid Collins and Bridget Nevin, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, Ireland, presented their project "Reflecting on COVID-19: The impact on Traveller Health in Ireland". Initially they mentioned that Roma and Travellers are seen as at high risk during COVID-19 and there is a lack of trust by healthcare providers. However, thanks to the good co-operation of Pavee Point with the Department of Health and the strengthened relationship with service providers, as well as the close work with the Agencies, they managed to develop culturally appropriate leaflets and videos; offered phone helplines that the communities could access, lobbied for Travellers and Roma to become priority groups for COVID-19 testing and vaccinations. Also evictions were banned and Travellers were represented at local community Call and Community Response Forums. 73% of Travellers accessed COVID-19 information via their local project which was recognised by the Irish Prime Minister.

Beata Bislim Olahova, Adviser, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues (CPRSI), said that ODIHR had received reports on a number of measures adopted by States and local authorities that can be considered discriminatory towards Roma and Sinti communities during the pandemic. For example, she mentioned the targeted community testing administered by the military, quarantine measures and full lockdowns of entire communities when only a handful of individuals were infected. It was worth noting that in Hungary isolated Roma communities had their vaccination delayed by more than one year and were only vaccinated when mobile vaccination services became available. However, the stateless and Roma without IDs could not obtain COVID vaccination certificates after receiving their shot.

When it comes to Roma and Sinti women specifically, she explained that the closure of schools increased the burden of household work and support for children's online education even when they lacked digital skills themselves. Roma women from Slovakia have reported experiences of segregation in maternity health departments, racial harassment, humiliation, neglect and abuse during childbirth as well as failure to be informed and give consent to medical treatment. Regarding the case of a racist cartoon in a Romanian publication where a Roma woman was portrayed in a stereotypical image related to their literacy, Ms. Olahova said that in this case media had played a major role in spreading the stereotypes. In this regard she also informed the conference that based on ODIHR analyses, 33% of the media reports in 10 countries were replicating hate speech against Roma in relation to the pandemic.

Ramiza Sakip, Advisor for Education from the Municipality of Shuto Orizari, North Macedonia gave examples of what the municipality had done in the time of crisis. A crisis headquarter was initially established with the

aim of providing food and hygiene packages to the most vulnerable. The increased activities led to the opening of a soup kitchen targeting poor families. In terms of specific issues faced by Roma women, cleaning ladies whose income had drastically decreased were impacted severely as a result of COVID-19. Another important issue in terms of health care was the lack of gynecological services at the Health Clinic but as a result of the support and good cooperation with the Ministry of Health, a specialist was identified and is now engaged and provides health services to Roma women.

4.3. Plenary session 2: Parallel workshops

4.3.1. How to become influencers? Youth activism!

The main challenge of Roma youth is the absence of their needs in policy documents while their political education is of great importance. Roma women organisations are very important since the same women present role models in the communities. Roma youth needs are related to the access of rights, tools and opportunities as a way to invest back in their communities. Roma women have the potential to change society if they use their own experiences to guide girls in becoming leaders. Even though young Roma are very active they are not taken seriously by decision makers.

4.3.2. Racism, antigypsyism and anti-nomadism

The main challenges are intensified manifestations of systemic and institutional antigypsyism during the pandemic (e.g. ill-treatment by the police, conspiracy theories, mistrust) as well as intersectional discrimination (e.g.. Traveller women experience racism while also oppression within their communities). In terms of legislation it was mentioned that they have been specifically targeting Travellers (e.g. legislation against trespassing in Ireland) while at the same time there is lack of data on the situation of Traveller women.

Living conditions and access to basic services have worsened while homeless migrant Roma women in Oslo are experiencing rough sleeping, harrassment and precarious health situations. Shared European Roma and Traveller Forum (ERTF) data was devastating: 57% of Roma children were not attending school since the start of COVID-19; over 40% of Roma are unemployed; 72,71% had to stop income generating activities; 91,93 % have no possibility of teleworking.

4.3.3. Intersectional Romani Feminism

Challenges have been indicated as part of structural racism manifestations: marginalisation, violence, inappropriate access to health care services, education, justice, police, and neglect of the specific problems of Roma women. These are the same inequalities Roma women face in their families while institutions do not act accordingly to protect their rights, including labour rights. Experience of Roma women cannot be understood from the experience of all Roma or the experience of all women and need relational thinking.

4.3.4. Empowerment through art

Women in art and culture work in different ways: organising exhibitions, digital media trainings, providing mentoring, building networks, producing books, comics, driving visible social media online, producing theatre performances and speaking at conferences for educational progress. This approach is seen as a very radical and transformative, very progressive, very modern and very inclusive.

However, long-term funding for their programmes is the biggest challenge. The second challenge is that many of them work independently and in order to receive funding it is necessary to establish an organisation, despite being recognised as role models. The promotion of art and history is not a political priority yet. These women face multiple forms of hate speech and disrespect.

They are often, in an unstable financial situation, and they contribute to the community during their free time using their private money. In addition, special measures are needed including internships to ensure Roma and Traveller women can access affordable childcare; retain secondary benefits while participating in training; and retain medical coverage for a set period after entering employment.

4.4. Plenary session 3: How the pandemic affects the problem of statelessness and lack of ID?

Nina Murray, Head of Policy and Research, European Network on Statelessness, presented an initiative aimed at exploring the challenges Roma women and girls face when it comes to access to civil status and equal nationality rights. She stated that statelessness is a violation of human rights and means “to not be recognised as a national by any state”. In Europe, states succession, displacement, complex civil registration procedures and deep rooted antigypsyism, leave many Roma without civil status and documentation.

Four priority issues have been identified by their initiative, from an intersectional perspective:

- ▶ Access to socio-economic rights;
- ▶ Access to birth registration and parental rights;
- ▶ Violence against women and girls;
- ▶ Absence of Roma women expertise from debates and discussions on statelessness and legal identity.

Senada Sali, European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), Hungary in her presentation focused on the risk and consequences of statelessness on pregnant Roma women, including evictions. Furthermore, she presented 4 cases on which the ERRC has worked:

- ▶ * Forced eviction of 6 pregnant women living on the riverside in Skopje, North Macedonia in 2016 who lacked identity documents after the demolition of their homes. They filed a complaint with the CEDAW Committee (Complaint no. 107/2016 and Complaint no. 110/2016) which brought a decision in favour of the Roma women in March 2020.
- ▶ * Eviction during the COVID-19 pandemic in Belgium in April 2020. As a result, several pregnant young women had no access to a gynecologist because of the lack of personal documents. The ERRC filed a complaint (no.195/2020) before the European Committee on Social Rights which is pending.
- ▶ * Roma Camp burned in Kiev, Ukraine.
- ▶ * Death of a pregnant 37 year-old Roma women and her unborn child in Skopje, North Macedonia, while she was waiting for the results of the COVID test in front of the hospital. This happened in March 2021 and the ERRC has filed a complaint before the Skopje Civil Court.

Lena Haap, Statelessness Officer, UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe, Geneva, emphasised the impact of COVID-19 on civil registration and documentation:

- ▶ Birth registration not declared “essential services” during the pandemic;
- ▶ Backlogs in processing due to reduced staffing and opening hours’
- ▶ Discontinuation of birth registration campaigns.

Sonja Barbul, Balkan Roma Women Network, Serbia explained that Montenegro had already achieved a lot in its efforts to eradicate statelessness. Montenegro recognised this issue through the introduction of the 2015 Law on Non-Contentious proceedings, which facilitates birth registration of persons born outside the national healthcare system. Furthermore, the 2018 Law on Foreigners introduced for the first time ever a statelessness determination procedure (SDP) and so far, 9 persons have been recognised as stateless through this procedure. In 2017, the UNHCR, together with the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare identified 607 persons at risk of statelessness and in 2021 brought this number down to 423. In addition, 992 persons, both formerly displaced and internally displaced and those at risk of statelessness, were provided support by UNHCR under the programme ACTIVATE, which aims to enhance the capacities of the social welfare system in Montenegro and support vulnerable people in accessing social protection and employment. However, the issue of returnees, people returning from Europe who also lack documentation and need birth certificates so they can be legally visible citizens in the country in which they wish to live also needs to be addressed. These are mostly people whose parents originate from Serbia or Kosovo⁷ and who were born elsewhere in Europe.

Mabera Kamberi, Ministry for Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia spoke about the measures that the government of North Macedonia took to solve the issues of persons without IDs. Firstly, she distinguished between persons without IDs and stateless persons, as they are two separate categories. When the government held the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers in 2012, they decided to open discussions on persons without IDs and heard from NGOs that there were 5 000 persons in that situation named “phantoms” by the media. The alarming information led the government to immediately establish an inter-ministerial working

⁷ All references to Kosovo, whether the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nation’s Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo

group including international organisations, Macedonian law organisations and Roma NGOs. In 2018 they established a smaller group to draft new legislation for persons without IDs. The exact number of persons without IDs had to be determined and mobile teams were established which registered those persons directly on the spot. 650 persons were identified in a period of 8 months. They were registered by the Ministry of Justice to access temporary documents and were asked additionally to apply for a temporary birth certificate, but only 200 applied. The Ministry was not able to find the remaining persons because they had moved from their place of living. However, the people who had applied for and had received temporary documents could access their social rights to education, health, employment and housing.

4.4.1 Advancing gender equality of Roma and Traveller Women in Council of Europe member states

As a follow up to the 7th IRWC was the research on Empowerment of Roma and Traveller women: A change under construction “Towards a Roadmap for Advancing Gender Equality of Roma and Traveller women in Council of Europe member states” through which national policies on gender equality and Roma integration, in relation to Roma women and girl were analysed based on 6 National Roma Inclusion Strategies (NRIS) and replies to a questionnaire sent out to the members of the Expert Committee on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM). Dr. Zora Popova, Independent Expert on minorities from Bulgaria who was commissioned by the Council of Europe to undertake the research, presented the main findings and opened the floor for discussion.

The discussion was mainly related to the methodology of the research and ownership of the report. Roma women expressed their concerns on the relevance and accuracy of the information and proposed to the Council of Europe to engage Roma women gender experts for future research, who, based on their experience and understanding of the Roma community could draft a more accurate report. It was clarified that the report, which is about legislation and policies, was based on replies by member states’ governments to a questionnaire which had been sent by the Council of Europe Secretariat.

4.5. Plenary session 4: Parallel workshops

4.5.1. Environmental racism

The main challenge that Roma face is that Roma communities are stereotyped as being environmentally problematic while at the same time the topic of environmental racism is underappreciated and understudied. The EU’s policy response is only just now emerging. Environmental racism is structural and interlinked with other dimensions, racially motivated discrimination and exclusion.

Roma Communities are disconnected or not properly provided with public environmental services. For instance, they are deprived or limited in access to clean and safe water, adequate sanitation and/or waste collection, while neighbouring areas receive these environmental services. Roma communities fall victim to forced evictions from land and water resources or other locations with high economic value to be used, for instance, for new housing or road projects, tourism facilities or for environmental reasons such as nature protection measures. In many cases, Roma communities are not included in urban planning. The portrayal of environmental racism in the media is based on two postulates : Romani people as victims, living on landfill sites, in dire living conditions. This idea creates the perception of Roma wanting to be poor. The other postulate is that the Roma are harming the environment by burning copper, rubber, cutting down wood etc.

4.5.2. Education of children and training

The main challenge is that Roma and Traveller children are deprived and faced with the negative consequences of COVID-19 in a disproportionate manner while the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing. School closing stopped many projects related to the presentation of Roma culture by Roma pupils to their non-Roma peers. The Roma Education Fund (REF), in order to address the above-mentioned challenges implements many activities – inclusion of Roma pupils; humanitarian aid; providing school material and smart devices to pupils, mentoring and tutoring classes; providing sanitary technical equipment for disinfection in kindergartens and schools. They have noted that access to electronic devices is easier given to boys than to girls by their parents, which illustrates the gender inequalities within the families. The role of Roma school assistants is especially note-worthy in the context of the pandemic as they are the bridge between school and Roma pupils, deliver school materials and try to ensure regular participation of children in school.

In particular, concerning the education of Traveller children in Ireland it was mentioned that institutional racism can be observed in the form of Traveller-only classes in mainstream schools and Traveller-only schools of which one was only phased out in 2020. This causes low educational attainments by Traveller girls and women, future unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. There is also a complete lack of positive visibility of Traveller culture in the curricula and in the whole school environment in Ireland.

4.5.3. Employment

The workshop highlighted many challenges and obstacles to Roma and Traveller employment: the very high unemployment rates, especially for women, stem from a lack of access to education and training; more Roma and Travellers are using employment measures and incentives, but not so many Roma and Traveller women; Roma and Travellers face discrimination in employment; they hide their identity to avoid discrimination in their job search; they mainly work in the informal sector and hesitate to transition to formal work for fear of losing their right to social benefits, facing unpredictable costs and accumulating debt; they lack information about business application procedures and knowledge on how to promote their work and how the labour market works (digitalisation, social networks, online platforms); although there are strategic documents for Roma in the field of employment throughout the region, they do not have information on how to access these programmes and how to apply for incentives.

The National Traveller Women's Forum in Ireland has been advocating at national level to introduce a National Traveller Employment and Enterprise strategy that will help to improve employment opportunities for Traveller women. However, it needs to be resourced since actions are lacking. The unemployment rate of Traveller women is 80%, based on the last national census in 2016. From the 20% who are employed, many face insecurity since they work part-time. Access to pension is a serious gap.

Good practices were identified in North Macedonia where three programmes were implemented: the Roma digital boost programme, the Roma Loan Officers programme, the Matching Fund of Roma organisations with Government funds as well as in Serbia with the Programme on Promoting Roma Entrepreneurship, which improved the capacities of young Roma in the field of digitalisation, starting an online business, professional practices, and reduced the number of Roma working in the informal market through the development of a legal framework, all introduced by the Roma Enterprise Development Initiative.

Active communication with the Roma community in order to identify the source of vulnerability and cross sector partnerships are needed. Women cannot do it alone; they need the support of men to achieve one community for all.

4.5.4. Being LGBTI and Roma or Traveller women

The intersectionality of being Roma or Traveller, woman and of different sexual orientation or gender identity is subversive both in the eyes on their community and those of mainstream society. Roma homosexual persons, particularly lesbians, do not fall under the racist and sexist stereotypes of Roma women which is causing even more hate. Moreover, Roma communities serve as both direct and symbolic oppressors: direct because they strive to preserve the existing system and symbolic in that the community structure actually tries to preserve the white male hierarchical order.

Roma and Traveller LGBTI women invite their heterosexual sisters for solidarity and critical thinking on heterosexual privileges. They should be able to develop their movement in their own safe place and reflect on how and whether to partner with other groups without losing their own battle for recognition.

4.6. Closing remarks

Tatjana Anđelić, Chair of the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM), Montenegro, moderated the closing session. Kjetmet Amet, President of RWYA "Luludi", Roma Women and Youth Association LULUDI, North Macedonia emphasised that there are laws and policies for Roma integration, however their implementation is lacking as well as systematic solutions to the discrimination and segregation faced by Roma women. She stressed that in the 1990s' Roma women organisations in North Macedonia were very strong and well organised but that in the last 5 years many of those organisations have shut down. She called for more sustainable programmes supported by the governments to allow for the continuous functioning of Roma women's organisations. She also called for Roma women organisations to be partnering with international organisations.

Snežana Samardžić-Marković, Director General of Democracy, Council of Europe, highlighted that the Conference programme was wide reaching and bold and of particular importance were: truth, justice, compensation and reconciliation; feminism, intersectionality and LGBTI issues; environmental racism; participation in public and political life. She also informed participants about the follow up as recommendations will contribute to the implementation of the Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion (2020-2025) and the Gender Equality Strategy (2018-2023), and feed into the work of the ADI-ROM on drafting a forthcoming recommendation by the Committee of Ministers on promoting equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls, as well as into the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for National Minorities.

Georgina Laboda, Rapporteur on Roma, Council of Europe Joint Council on Youth, board member of Phiren Amencia, Hungary, expressed that the Roma population is the youngest population in Europe, approximately 40% are under 18. Youth needs are marginalised: 65% encounter racism while attending school or university, and 95% observe discriminatory treatment and behaviour directed at Roma, as the research of Phiren Amencia revealed in 2019. The situation with regard to Roma girls is even worse. She called on keeping the strength of young Roma activists in the following years with the hope that their needs and recommendations will be valued soon by the Council of Europe and the member states.

Steffen Hudolin, Head of Cooperation, Delegation of the European Union in North Macedonia explained that throughout the conference he noticed that the needs of women and girls is not only about financial aids. He also presented some of the achievements around Roma integration in the last decade. However, the cycle of poverty, discrimination and exclusion still prevails in many countries. For Roma women and girls, the situation is much more complex. He concluded that there is a need to work together on improving the coordination of activities and delivery of measurable results.

Mabera Kamberi, Adviser to the Minister, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia and member of the Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM) thanked all the participants and speakers for the productive and lively discussions and reiterated the importance of these International Roma Women's Conferences as a platform to exchange and discuss between the younger generations of Roma and Traveller women and the more experienced ones to ensure the continuity of the work and the transmission of knowledge.

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