

# 9th International Roma and Traveller Women's Conference

## Building Equality Together



Organised by the Roma and Travellers Division, Council of Europe  
Government of North Macedonia  
Relevant international and national stakeholders  
(OSCE, UNDP, USAID and Romalítico)

**REPORT**  
**By Marija Sulejmanova**  
***General Rapporteur***



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**30 November – 1 December 2023**

Organised by the Roma and Travellers Division, Council of Europe  
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*General Rapporteur*

Council of Europe

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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.

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# Contents

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<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>9</b>
3.1. Civil society recommendations to the Council of Europe	9
3.2. Civil society recommendations to member states	9
3.3. Civil society recommendations regarding the work of NGOs	10
<b>4. PROCEEDINGS</b>	<b>11</b>
4.1. Opening statements and keynote speeches	11
4.2. Plenary session 1: Stocktaking of the results of previous International Roma and Traveller Women's conferences and presentation of the Draft Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on Equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls	13
4.3. Plenary session 2: Building alliances between women's networks. Effective implementation of legal and policy standards for Roma and Traveller women and girls	13
4.4. Plenary session 3: Presentation of workshop conclusions and recommendations	14
4.5. Plenary session 4.1: International and national policy roadmaps on ensuring equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls	16
4.6. Plenary session 4.2: A national perspective on measures aimed at addressing the vulnerable situation of Roma and Traveller women and girls	17
4.7. Closing remarks	18



# 1. Introduction

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**W**omen throughout Council of Europe member states still face inequalities in many respects. Antigypsyism, racism, discrimination, exclusion, and extreme poverty reinforce the disadvantages faced by Roma and Traveller women. To effectively improve the situation of Roma and Traveller women, national and local authorities need to follow certain international and national standards. The civil society sector is essential in monitoring the implementation of those standards. Building alliances between minority and mainstream women's lobbies can foster a more inclusive and intersectional approach towards gender equality advocacy. Together, these alliances can develop effective work aimed at achieving meaningful and lasting change for the benefit of all women.

The Ninth International Roma and Traveller Women's Conference "**Building Equality Together**" was organised in Skopje from 30 November to 1 December 2023 in close collaboration with the Government of North Macedonia and several international and national civil society stakeholders. The event served as a forum for exchange between Roma and Traveller women's civil society on building alliances with the goal of achieving a coordinated, inclusive, and overarching central support and monitoring system in the implementation of key standards of the Council of Europe and other international organisations. Moreover, the Ninth Conference contributed to supporting the implementation of the Council of Europe Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion (2020-2025) and creating synergies with similar policies adopted by international organisations, such as the United Nations, the OSCE and the European Union.

The Conference was divided into plenary sessions and workshops. The structure was as follows:

## **Plenary Sessions:**

- ▶ **Plenary Session 1:** Stocktaking of the results of previous International Roma and Traveller Women's Conferences and presentation of the Draft Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on Equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls;
- ▶ **Plenary Session 2:** Building alliances between women's networks. Effective implementation of legal and policy standards is applied for Roma and Traveller women and girls;
- ▶ **Plenary Session 3:** Presentation of workshop conclusions and recommendations;
- ▶ **Plenary Session 4.1:** International and national policy roadmaps on ensuring equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls;
- ▶ **Plenary Session 4.2:** A national perspective on measures aimed at addressing the vulnerable situation of Roma and Traveller women and girls.

## **Workshops:**

- ▶ **Workshop 1:** Combating antigypsyism and discrimination against Roma and Traveller women and girls and supporting real and effective equality;
- ▶ **Workshops 2:** Supporting the democratic participation of Roma and Traveller women and promoting trust and accountability;
- ▶ **Workshop 3:** Supporting access to inclusive quality education and training for Roma and Traveller women and girls.

With approximately 80 participants physically present, the Conference was enriched by valuable discussions from the Roma and Traveller women from 16 member states and Kosovo\*. The recommendations drawn up throughout the conference are presented in part three of this report.

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\*All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.





## 2. General observations and conclusions

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**M**any speakers and participants highlighted that the challenges faced by Roma and Traveller women and girls are multilayered, intersectional and require a tailor-made approach to tackle them.

### **Elevating every issue through the lens of Roma and Traveller women and girls**

The gender approach should be present in every aspect of the work done for and by the Roma and Traveller community. By incorporating the gender lens, the stakeholders and the civil society sector can address the unique challenges faced by Roma and Traveller women and girls. Not only does this approach emphasise the need for a stronger gender equality agenda, but it also highlights the need for an intersectional approach which can respond to the different generational needs. Besides the focus on the narrative/context and activities, financial support remains crucial and the most challenging for addressing the needs and shortcomings.

“We cannot discuss gender equality if we do not discuss what is happening when the two intersect and meet each other (race and gender)”<sup>2</sup>

Roma and Traveller women have the powerful potential to change the realities of the community. However, this requires more measures, joint activities, concrete actions, and adequate investment in advancing their position in society. Roma and Traveller women remain mostly out of the labour market and, in this sense, more knowledge-sharing, training, and incentives are required to make their active participation feasible within it. The current trends in the digital and green transition can also help to advance the position of Roma and Traveller women and girls.

### **New trends offer new opportunities**

Embracing new trends such as **green and digital initiatives** can tremendously benefit Roma and Traveller women and girls, since they create an opportunity to gain new skills, access employment opportunities, share experiences through connectivity and improve financial independence. Therefore, challenges such as a lack of digital literacy and understanding of the environment should be tackled through upskilling and reskilling measures.

### **Economic empowerment is key for the elimination of gender-based violence**

The elimination of violence is crucial for promoting gender equality and access to employment and education of Roma and Traveller women and girls. It serves the wellbeing of women, empowers them, and benefits the whole community. The elimination of gender-based violence against Roma and Traveller women and girls also requires education to recognise violence and obtain knowledge of the rights and mechanisms, as well as to fight against early marriages in the Roma and Traveller communities.

The **economic empowerment** of Roma and Traveller women and girls is the key feature of the fight against gender-based violence. There are positive examples of Roma women’s entrepreneurship in North Macedonia that has provided enough financial freedom to enable women to make sustainable change in their communities. However, in communities where gender-based violence is still a burning issue, shelters must be established with the relevant service providers and social workers who understand the struggles of Roma and Traveller women and girls and are equipped to assist them whenever necessary. Finally, the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence should be instrumental in the work on Roma and Traveller women and girls.

### **The active involvement of women in policies, politics and the gender equality agenda**

Roma and Traveller women and girls can bring diverse experience to policy making, contribute to the agenda of gender equality in general, build an inclusive society, and design more suitable public policies, yet they are

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2. Statement by Sebijan Fejzula, Kale Amenge Portugal, Panellist, Plenary Session 2.

often excluded from the mainstream gender discussions and in the design and implementation processes of design and implementation of gender equality policies. There is a crucial need for Roma and Traveller women to become active agents in the political arena and decision-making processes at national and local level. The first step to achieve this would be to enhance the understanding of Roma and Traveller women and girls about essential political tools and concepts, such as the power of voting, membership of political parties, electoral mechanisms at various levels, etc.

To support Roma and Traveller women and girls, it is therefore crucial to build alliances and include them in all gender equality efforts, as well as in the mainstream agenda. The struggle of Roma and Traveller women and girls is seen as unique; however, they can benefit from shared discussions with other marginalised women's communities and other communities of colour, leading to solutions and support.

“Look for contacts with mainstream organisations and get close to them because they have impact on policies”<sup>3</sup>

### **Alliance and solidarity with mainstream and other marginalised women's groups is necessary**

Establishing connections and creating alliances between Roma and Traveller women and mainstream and other marginalised groups can facilitate collective advocacy, leverage the support and visibility of Roma and Traveller women and girls, contribute to an exchange of experiences, and ensure a resilient and supportive feminist community.

The education of Roma and Travellers, especially that of women and girls, remains a significant challenge. Roma and Travellers face discrimination in schools, segregation, and bureaucratic difficulties in accessing measures created for them, as well as institutional racism. There is still a strong need for dialogue and the sharing of experiences and initiatives, for more networks specifically focused on Roma and Traveller communities, frequent collaboration, and an assessment of progress made on the path towards feminism. Roma and Traveller women's organisations lack sufficient financial resources and sustainability for their projects. Further initiatives are needed to enhance capacity-building, training and empowerment to foster more structured discussions on gender equality.

### **Towards a Roma feminist movement**

Tackling the unique challenges and experiences that Roma and Traveller women face requires constant communication and collaboration between civil society organisations, activists, and institutions. A Roma feminist movement could amplify the voices of Roma and Traveller women in politics and activism, serving as a tool for advocacy, the sharing of experiences and bringing about common actions.

“Roma women's networks and relevant alliances can set up a platform that goes beyond individual empowerment, it can contribute social change.”<sup>4</sup>

### **The next step is to involve men in the discussion**

In addition to support from mainstream women's movements and movements of women of colour, Roma and Traveller women and girls also require support from **men**, both from the Roma and Traveller community and the mainstream community.

Involving men in the discussions about gender equality can have significant benefits. When men actively participate in gender equality discussions, they gain insights into the specific challenges faced by Roma and Traveller women and girls. This understanding helps address intersectional discrimination.

By fostering multi-layered discussions, we can create a cultural shift that can lead to transformative change. Involving men also educates them about gender equality, its importance, benefits, and their own role in advancing the gender equality agenda.

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3. Soraya Post, Chair of the Board, European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network, former Member of the European Parliament, former Chair of the International Romani Women's Network (IRWIN), Panellist in Plenary 2.

4. Georgios Stamatias, Member of the Greek delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, speaking in the opening panel.

# 3. Recommendations

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## 3.1. Civil society recommendations to the Council of Europe

### The Council of Europe should:

1. facilitate activities that promote not just gender equality, but also an introduction to feminism, how to discuss and see the issues from a gender angle and how to advocate as a feminist;
2. facilitate discussions with other important donors to create synergies between projects which can strengthen the planning of activities for Roma and Traveller women and girls;
3. continue supporting Roma and Traveller women's empowerment through activities including joint programmes;
4. develop outreach activities to create networks between Roma and Traveller women at local, national and European levels and to raise awareness of the importance of a unified voice;
5. initiate a study on the status of Roma and Traveller women's movements including a collection of best practices;
6. conceptualise and implement advocacy initiatives that promote gender equality of other marginalised groups, mainstream groups and Roma and Traveller women and girls;
7. continue its work on intersectionality and include Roma and Traveller women in discussions and working groups that address mainstream challenges, including on the green and digital transition;
8. promote the need for funding, including the creation of a women's initiatives fund, and support joint initiatives between Roma and Traveller women and mainstream groups;
9. facilitate dialogue with member states on implementation of the Committee of Ministers Recommendation for the Equality of Roma Women and Girls<sup>5</sup> and encourage member states to budget for activities to benefit Roma and Traveller women and girls.

## 3.2. Civil society recommendations to member states

### Member states should:

1. mainstream Roma and Traveller women and girls' issues into their gender equality strategies and agendas and involve Roma and Traveller women and girls in the drafting and implementation of them;
2. enhance action against discrimination through policies that recognise the multidimensional discrimination faced by Roma and Traveller women and girls;
3. strengthen collaboration with Roma and Traveller women's organisations and gender equality organisations in the implementation of relevant strategies and other mainstream policies, including, but not limited to, housing, education, health, and employment;
4. grant support to local women's civil society organisations that work on gender-based violence, access to justice and the emancipation of Roma and Traveller women and girls;
5. include Roma and Traveller gender sensitive budgeting in the implementation of national and local equality policies;
6. create and budget for the implementation of national action plans on the empowerment of Roma and Traveller women;
7. improve the visibility of Roma and Traveller women and girls by involving them in campaigns run by different state and local institutions;
8. create policies related to the green and digital transition that recognise and tackle the gap between Roma and non-Roma, including the gender gap faced by Roma and Traveller women and girls;

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5. The Recommendation was in draft status at the time of the Conference.

9. create programmes to enable Roma and Traveller women and girls to obtain and upgrade their digital skills, as well as benefit from training for entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship and employment;
10. provide training to educators and teachers on inclusive models of education that include intersectional and intercultural dimensions and an understanding of combating discrimination and school segregation of children, especially of Roma and Traveller pupils and children with disabilities;
11. include mentorship programmes in the educational system for Roma and Traveller pupils and students that rely on leadership and empowerment and communication with parents;
12. include systematic solutions to meet the needs of Roma and Traveller women and girls who are victims of violence by creating accessible shelters for women and girls in or near Roma neighbourhoods, providing legal support, protection and information in an understandable language;
13. organise training of social workers to raise their awareness of the intersectional dimension of violence that Roma and Traveller women and girls can face;
14. collect disaggregated data on hate speech and tackle the aspects faced by Roma and Traveller women and girls;
15. provide additional financial incentives for girls to attend school by creating targeted conditional cash programmes<sup>6</sup>;
16. revise and/or remove the legal barriers that can limit the employment of women, including Roma and Traveller women.;
17. provide free locally accessible health services and insurance to Roma and Traveller women and girls with gender sensitive facilities;
18. ensure that the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence as transferred in the national system, should also respond to the needs of Roma and Traveller women and girls;
19. support infrastructure for connectivity and ensure that every Roma child has internet access.

### 3.3. Civil society recommendations regarding the work of NGOs

#### Civil society organisations should:

1. utilise digital platforms, communication channels, events, and media platforms to raise awareness about the creation of networks for Roma and Traveller women and girls;
2. create safe spaces for exchanges between organisations for Roma and Traveller women, mainstream women and/or women of colour;
3. advocate for their involvement in national and European discussions and working groups on green and digital policies;
4. advocate for training programmes on digital skills and green technologies which can enhance the employability of Roma and Traveller women and girls;
5. implement activities that foster discussions between men, and between men and women, on gender equality and the active participation of Roma and Traveller women and girls in society and politics;
6. organise introductory sessions on feminism and capacity-building for activists and advocates for Roma and Traveller women and girls;
7. promote a positive representation of Roma and Traveller women and girls in the media to challenge stereotypes and prejudices.

6. The World Bank implements projects that include targeted cash programmes to women per household and are framed as conditional cash transfer programmes (CCTs). This recommendation was proposed by the World Bank as CCTs are effective in postponing marriage and reproduction among school-age girls.

# 4. Proceedings

## 4.1. Opening statements and keynote speeches



The Ninth International Roma and Traveller Women’s Conference **“Building Equality Together”** was opened by **Mabera Kamberi**, representative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia, and Vice-Chair and Gender Equality Rapporteur of the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM). In her opening remarks, she stated that the conference represented an **“extraordinary opportunity for institutions, other partners, and civil society organisations to discuss important topics affecting Roma and Travellers women and girls and to jointly trace the status of Roma and Traveller women.”** North Macedonia, hosting the conference for the second time, incorporates the gender perspective through the Gender Equality Strategy in all state policies. The Istanbul Convention entered into force in North Macedonia in 2018. As a multicultural state, North Macedonia continuously creates policies to make equality a reality through the “one society for all concept,” including a gender approach at levels.

In her capacity as Vice-Chair and Gender Equality Rapporteur of the Council of Europe’s Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM), she shared the priorities of the Gender Equality Strategy of the Council Europe 2018-2024, namely the prevention of gender stereotypes and sexism, prevention and fighting against gender-based violence, equal access to justice, participation of women and men in decision making and integration of gender policies into all other policies.

**Bojan Maricic**, Vice-Prime Minister of the Government of North Macedonia, described North Macedonia as a functional multiethnic state with a strong and full political will to continuously implement the Strategy for Roma Inclusion which aimed to integrate the Roma community equally with all other communities in the country, stating that **“we are firmly committed to following the Roma policies, including the European Roma Platform; and for the priorities for Roma we included resources from the central budget and other available funds”**. He highlighted that North Macedonia provided systematic solutions for the issues faced by Roma, such as the latest changes undertaken for persons without official identity documentation, and that the country aimed to fight against antigypsyism as a specific form of racism against Roma.

**Bjørn Berge**, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, stated that these conferences represented a unique platform for Roma and Traveller women to discuss and share their knowledge and experiences, as well as reflect on the causes of the current problems and propose solutions. He informed the audience that the conference would serve as a place for developing cooperation on different projects and that the recommendations arising from it would be brought to decision makers.

He referred to the Council of Europe priorities and shared that **“gender equality as a key requirement for functioning democracy”**.

He noted that all 46 leaders of the Council of Europe’s member states had agreed upon the Reykjavik principles for democracy that also emphasized the equal participation of women and girls in public and political life and shared that **“gender equality is a key requirement for functioning democracy”**. He highlighted that the challenges faced by Roma and Traveller women needed to be tackled from different angles and required new standards, one of which would be the future Committee of Ministers Recommendation on Equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls that the Council of Europe was currently working on.

**Jovana Trenevaska**, Minister of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia, expressed her gratitude to the Council of Europe for organising the conference in North Macedonia in close collaboration with the Government. The conference served as a platform to address the obstacles confronted by Roma and Traveller women and girls, as well as an opportunity to put forward viable solutions to overcome these challenges. Minister Trenevaska affirmed that North Macedonia’s efforts to improve the circumstances of Roma women came from both the Strategy for Inclusion of Roma and the National Action Plan for the Protection, Promotion, and Fulfilment of the Human Rights of Roma Women and Girls, highlighting that **“the improvement of the Roma community situation is directly linked to the empowerment of Roma woman”**. The Minister also stated that North Macedonia was actively advancing the gender agenda by integrating gender aspects into every state policy, including targeted efforts to address gender stereotypes, prevent violence against women, ensure equal access to justice, promote balanced participation in decision-making processes, and implement gender responsive budgeting.

**Sini Paukkunen Mykkanen**, Ambassador of the Permanent Representation of Finland to the Council of Europe, stated that **“since 2007 these conferences provide an opportunity for women to address on an international stage the issues affecting them and present a valuable space for sharing experience”**. She reminded the audience that the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on improving access to justice for Roma and Travellers in Europe was a response to the needs expressed in previous conferences and the work undertaken through Joint EU/CoE JUSTROM Programme. She highlighted that this conference was, firstly, a forum for building alliances, secondly, an opportunity to discuss the Draft Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers on Equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls and thirdly, a contribution to the creation of synergies with other international stakeholders, like the UN, the OSCE and the EU.

**Kilian Wahl**, Ambassador and Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, shared that North Macedonia had shown political will to improve the situation of Roma with the work carried out for persons without documentation and by the fact that this conference was being held for the second time in Skopje. He highlighted that **“the struggle of Roma women is complex and followed by multiple forms of discrimination.”** He stated that Roma women’s NGOs lacked the financial resources to conduct long-term projects and that donors needed to continue and increase support. He added that more efforts are needed to improve the employment and representation of Roma women in state institutions. He added that OSCE would continue to address the structural challenges faced by Roma women.

**Armen Grigoryan**, United Nations Development Programme Resident Representative for the Republic of North Macedonia, stated that **“Roma women are deprived from integration and full participation in the society because of low level of education, employment and weak opportunities.”** UNDP in North Macedonia has implemented joint initiatives regarding inclusion, such as the socio-economic integration of returnees by providing education and entrepreneurship training. In addition, UNDP works toward creating the most suitable models of integration for returnees and systematic interventions for education and employment. With the Norway Funds and in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Municipality of Suto Orizari, UNDP built a new and modern kindergarten in Suto Orizari.

**Georgios Stamatias**, member of the Greek delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, shared that this conference was **“an international platform that gives Roma and Traveller women and girls a chance to exchange views and experiences on matters of common interests”**. He stated firstly that **“Roma and Traveller women are the core of the families and that their wellbeing affects the community as a whole.”** Secondly, he highlighted that empowerment was essential and that all stakeholders should implement

measures involving advocacy, policy changes and recognition of the diversity of Roma and Traveller women and girls. Thirdly, he recalled that women's networks had a crucial role to play in advancing the gender agenda and that both men and women needed to be educated about the socio-economic situation and the impact on stereotypes to women and girls. He concluded by highlighting the need to support the establishment of safe spaces for women to share their experiences and create solidarity.

#### **4.2. Plenary session 1: Stocktaking of the results of previous International Roma and Traveller Women's conferences and presentation of the Draft Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on Equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls**

**Mabera Kamberi**, representative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia, and Vice-Chair and Gender Equality Rapporteur of the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM), shared that the Council of Europe's working group of government representatives and experts had met six times to prepare the Draft Recommendation on Equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls. The aim of the recommendation is to assist member states and other relevant stakeholders to promote and achieve equality with a specific focus on antigypsyism, intersectional discrimination and violence. The reference to intersectional discrimination recognises the diversity of Roma and Traveller women and girls including the nomadic way of life, migration and refugee status, religion, sexual orientation, age, disability, gender identity and expression and other personal characteristics. **She recalled that the Draft Recommendation reflected the obstacles faced by Roma and Traveller women and girls as reported by many international and national bodies.**

**Oana Tabă**, Senior Project Officer of the Roma and Travellers Division of the Council of Europe, and Co-Secretary of the ADI-ROM, presented the measures contained in the Draft Recommendation and the arguments used in the drafting process. The Draft Recommendation was followed by specific guidelines in all essential areas. **The guidelines and draft recommendation were based on the judgments of the European Court for Human Rights which not only obliged member states to refrain from a violation of human rights, but also to take measures to advance rights.** Furthermore, the guidelines were also based on the findings of monitoring bodies such as the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), and the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), as well as reports from the Commissioner for Human Rights. She also stated that the Draft Recommendation resulted from the discussions raised during the eight previous Roma and Traveller Women's conferences. The Council of Europe will provide support to member states for the implementation of the recommendation in forms of law revisions, actions, plans, strategies, and capacity-building activities. It also calls upon civil society organisations to advocate for, make use of and monitor the initiatives to be developed through this draft recommendation.

Recommendation CM/Rec (2024)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on equality of Roma and Traveller women and girls was adopted on 5 April 2024.

#### **4.3. Plenary session 2: Building alliances between women's networks. Effective implementation of legal and policy standards for Roma and Traveller women and girls**

**Soraya Post**, Chair of the Board of ERGO network, former Member of the European Parliament, and former Chair of the International Romani Women's Network (IRWIN), shared her experience in activism and her path towards becoming a member of the European Parliament by making alliances with mainstream structures. She highlighted that now **"there is a Roma woman in almost every member State being active and working on improving the situation of the community."** A challenge remains in the political arena, especially in terms of the presence of right-wing parties in the European Parliament. She further stated that the women's lobby in Brussels was strong, and that Roma and Traveller women activists needed to fight together against early marriages, domestic violence, and trafficking of women since these are societal problems. **She recommended the following:**

- ▶ **Roma and Traveller women should communicate with mainstream organisations and make them understand that they all face the same prejudice;**
- ▶ **Roma and Traveller women should know their rights, obtain knowledge, and use that knowledge in politics.**



**Sebijan Fejzula**, from Kale Amenge, Portugal, shared that the foundation of activism lay in the fact that Roma women survived despite the five centuries of oppression, recalling and affirming the resilience of Roma and Traveller women. In her view the gender equality discussion must incorporate the intersectional discrimination of race/ethnicity and gender and that this would bring Roma and Traveller women closer to a dialogue with other women experiencing the same issues, such as women of colour and other marginalised minority women. Roma and Traveller women should be part of discussions of the majority. She **recommended the following:**

- ▶ **Roma and Traveller women should re-shift the agenda and form general notions that Roma problems are societal problems; and**
- ▶ **Roma and Traveller women should rethink what they want to achieve with alliances with other women, especially with women of colour.**

**Terezia Rostas**, representative from the Feminist Collective of Romani Gender Experts, shared her personal struggle and experience of attending the educational system in the United Kingdom while maintaining the tradition of wearing a Roma scarf. She presented the work carried out with the Roma community in her city, at the local level, and explained that this work at grassroots level requires the building of alliances with political partners to address the needs of the community and Roma women. The women in her city would like to have multicultural museums which represent Roma women. She **recommended the following:**

- ▶ **Roma and Traveller women should create policies and discuss them closely with the local authorities;**
- ▶ **Roma should and could be teachers/educators and actively participate in the educational system;**
- ▶ **Roma and Traveller women should share their culture with other minorities.**

#### **4.4. Plenary session 3: Presentation of workshop conclusions and recommendations**

##### **4.4.1. Workshop 1: Combating antigypsyism and discrimination against Roma and Traveller women and girls and supporting real and effective equality**

In her keynote speech, **Zaneta Popovska**, National Rule of Law Officer at the OSCE Mission to Skopje, provided an explanation of the term “discrimination”, the mechanisms for protection and the legal framework on discrimination in North Macedonia, and covered topics such as education, health, housing, gender-based violence and the trafficking of women and girls.





The ensuing discussion gave participants the opportunity to exchange on the need to recognise and sanction antigypsyism through laws, as well as to recognise and eliminate it from school textbooks. Furthermore, participants discussed the need for measures for women who are victims of gender-based violence and struggle to obtain protection. For example, in Finland, there is a need for a detailed database on victims of gender-based violence, whereas in North Macedonia victims need a women's shelter. Workers in shelters and administration need to be aware that violence is not part of Roma culture. The economic empowerment of Roma and Traveller women as a precondition for fighting gender-based violence is also necessary. In Ireland, there is a need to change the protection system for victims of gender-based violence, however political will is lacking. Discrimination is also present in Ukraine, where Roma encounter difficulties to access humanitarian aid.

#### **4.4.2. Workshop 2: Supporting the democratic participation of Roma and Traveller women and promoting trust and accountability**

**Alexandra Raykova**, ROMACT facilitator from Bulgaria, shared her experience of local development in Bulgaria and Romania, in particular the decision-making and policy-making processes at local level, the participation of women in Community Action Groups and the organisation of coaching sessions in communities. Small grant scheme projects have given women the opportunity to participate in municipal budgeting and project planning. Similar results were highlighted through the Joint European Union / Council of Europe ROMACTED Programme in the Western Balkans, such as community mobilisation and specific activities targeting the empowerment of Roma women and youth.

The importance of women's involvement in politics and decision-making processes, including in local politics, was highlighted. Essential steps to support democratic participation are voter education and ensuring that women's needs are the main targets of it. In addition, Roma and Traveller women must be involved in the design and implementation of gender equality policies. This requires resources - Roma women's networks need both practical and financial support. Participants also expressed the wish to see the continuation of joint programmes of the European Union and Council of Europe.

#### **4.4.3. Workshop 3: Supporting access to inclusive education and training for Roma and Traveller women and girls**

In her keynote speech, **Manjola Veizi**, Executive Director of the Roma Women Rights Centre from Albania, gave a broad overview of the challenges and needs in supporting inclusive education and fighting segregation in

schools. She shared her experience in working on segregation in Albania, specifically regarding early marriages, economic hardship, bureaucratic procedures in accessing measures, and cultural norms.

Roma children, including girls, struggle to access education. Teachers in Ireland have low expectations of Traveller children and there is a lack of implementation of Traveller-targeted policies in accessing education. A huge challenge is the lack of topics on the history and culture of Travellers in the educational system. In Norway, there is a concern about the situation of Roma and Travellers. They lack high education. There is a need for parental support and digital education for their children. Stereotypes and segregation persist and there is a need for both policymaking policies and proper monitoring.



#### 4.5. Plenary session 4.1: International and national policy roadmaps on ensuring equality for Roma and Traveller women and girls

**Valerie Morrica**, Senior Social Development Specialist from the World Bank, presented the international gender policy agenda in the region of Europe and Central Asia, the trends in the region and the investments of the World Bank around the Roma gender equality agenda. She highlighted that, despite the assumption that this region did not have to boost the gender equality agenda, there were still many challenges in the fields of labour market, access to assets, access to finance, ownership and land property. **She stated that women were disproportionately affected by external impacts, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as events in Ukraine and natural disasters.** The Roma gender agenda has significant potential in the region, as an expected 20% of new labour market entrants in the Western Balkans will be Roma. An analysis of investments and the 33 programmes focusing on Roma revealed that one third of them emphasize education. However, most are pilot programmes lacking rigorous data, monitoring and impact evaluation. Key areas identified as critical include education, due to low secondary school participation, early marriages, financial incentives for girls to attend school, targeted conditional cash transfers for children, and access to pension and health insurance.

**Vesna Bisheva**, Team Leader for the Inclusive Growth Team from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), outlined their principles guiding their work on Roma issues, emphasizing a holistic approach. She highlighted the importance of understanding the diversity among Roma women and ensuring their inclusion in all initiatives. The principle of “leaving no one behind” addresses the challenges faced by the most marginalised, not only by providing support, but also by empowering them and making structural changes. She stressed the need for collective targets and objectives, robust data, and collaborative initiatives. With financial support from the EU, UNDP is currently conducting an in-depth analysis of the situation and vulnerabilities of Roma in Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia. In 2025 UNDP will repeat the survey carried out in 2017 on Roma in the Western Balkans. Additionally, she emphasized that **local platforms, comprising key stakeholders such as institutions and NGOs, should work together to address the complexity of the issues.**

**Clara Pastor Sanchez**, Programme Assistant for Roma Regional Programmes in the Western Balkans, and Türkiye (European Commission/DG NEAR), stated that the topic of the plenary session was currently being discussed in the European Commission. She emphasized two main policies, the Gender Action Plan and the Roma Strategic Framework, as both being part of Chapter 3 which is followed by countries in the accession process. **The Gender Action Plan sets standards that member states should follow and, by 2025, 85% of new projects to be financed will have to be gender responsive. Additionally, 5% of these new projects will incorporate the empowerment of women and girls.** This implies the need to make Roma projects gender sensitive. Additionally, she shared that discussions are ongoing about mainstreaming Roma issues and recommended that everyone join forces to continue empowerment efforts.



#### 4.6. Plenary session 4.2: A national perspective on measures aimed at addressing the vulnerable situation of Roma and Traveller women and girls



**Mila Carovska**, Executive Director of the Health Education and Research Association (HERA), former Vice-Prime Minister and the Minister of Labour and Social Policy in North Macedonia, shared her views on the importance of multilayered discussions about the needs of Roma women. **She stated that most existing policies are not gender-sensitive and do not accommodate the needs of diverse groups in society.** She further underlined that only 23% of Roma are employed in North Macedonia, and just 8% of them are Roma women.

She stressed the need for employment campaigns and raised concerns about dropout rates, with 5% of the new generation leaving school each year.

**Biljana Kotevska**, Gender Equality Expert for the “EU for Rule of Law” Project (European Policy Institute), explained the process conducted regarding the adoption of the Roma Women’s Action Plan in North Macedonia which was supported by the Council of Europe. Regarding the drafting methodology, two focus groups were organised, including a public discussion. The priority areas of the Action Plan were selected based on input arising from those. The draft text of the Action Plan was open for comments and later circulated to the government for approval. This Action Plan covers employment, education, healthcare, gender-based violence, access to justice and participation in public life. **The aim of the Action Plan is to ensure that Roma women and girls have equal access in all areas.**

**Lillan Stoen**, Taternes Landsforening (Norway), talked about the lack of alternatives to nomadic and semi-nomadic education and the effect that this had on Traveller children. Antigypsyism is not mentioned in key documents such as the Government’s strategy against hate speech 2016-2020, the Action Plan to improve the conditions of Roma, the Government action against racism and discrimination 2020-2023, or the new Action Plan against racism and discrimination 2024-2027.

**Bridget Kelly**, Community development worker in the National Traveller Women’s Forum from Ireland, referred to the National Strategy for Roma of Ireland and the planning of the strategy for the 2024-2029 period. She highlighted that the biggest challenge was the lack of timeline and progress indicators. She recalled the importance of the implementation and functioning of the Istanbul Convention to protect Roma and Traveller women and girls.



#### 4.7. Closing remarks

In his closing speech, **Fljakron Bedzeti**, State Secretary in the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia, stated that the next step of the country was to include Roma in the circular economy and in the implementation of the green and digital agenda by increasing their digital literacy and skills. The next work at the local level would be the design of local plans and increased involvement and commitment in local actions of municipalities.

**Eleni Tsetsekou**, Head of the Roma and Travellers Division, Council of Europe, provided a retrospective of the two-day conference and the main takeaways. She thanked the Government of North Macedonia for co-hosting the event, as well as the partners who contributed to its organisation, namely OSCE, UNDP, USAID and the Institute for Research and Policy Analyses – Romalitico. She concluded her remarks by stating that the topic of gender equality and the equality of Roma and Traveller women and girls would remain among the priorities of the Council of Europe in the years to come.

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