

# Challenges Faced by Roma Women in Europe on Education, Employment, Health and Housing - Focus on Czech Republic, Romania and Greece

**Roxana ANDREI**

e-mail: [roxanna.andrei@gmail.com](mailto:roxanna.andrei@gmail.com)

**George MARTINIDIS**

e-mail: [gmart55@yahoo.com](mailto:gmart55@yahoo.com)

**Tana TKADLECOVA**

e-mail: [tana.tkadlecova@gmail.com](mailto:tana.tkadlecova@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

*Roma women in Europe are probably discriminated against more than any other group, facing discrimination both for their ethnic origin and their gender. Due to being part of a minority facing isolation, poverty, discrimination and often embracing masculine social values, Roma women have to face multiple challenges. However, the nature of these challenges varies between the different states, as is evident in the case of the three countries examined here. Although positive steps have been taken in all three countries lately, in practice, Roma girls and women still face discrimination with respect to equal access to education, employment, health care and housing. Current policies and initiatives do not have a significant impact because they are most often designed in a top-down approach, with little or no consultation and direct involvement of the Roma community. What is needed to produce a real impact is a different approach: a bottom-up initiative taking place within Roma communities, both geographically and organisationally.*

**Keywords:** *Roma women, discrimination, integration, minorities, social policies, vulnerable social groups, education, employment, health, housing*

## INTRODUCTION

Discrimination against Roma women has a structural and pervasive character, deeply rooted in the history and practices of many European cultures and communities, and impregnating all sectors and areas throughout their lives. Inequalities experienced by Roma women have a cumulative effect, in the sense that discrimination experienced in one area at one stage of their lives will lead to subsequent disadvantages later on. Discrimination thus becomes a multi-layered phenomenon for Roma women, who are often subjected to multiple discrimination.

Roma women face discrimination shared by their ethnic group in terms of access to employment, education, health care and housing, but also related to their gender, in the broader context of the discrimination of women, especially in more traditional societies, as well as in the specific context of Roma culture and role of Roma women. This leads to one of the „dilemmas of intersectionality” (Oprea, 2005, p. 140): being forced to choose between their gender and their race in an environment where they are constructed as mutually exclusive. “There is a false dichotomy between women’s rights and Romani-ness where they become construed as mutually exclusive, ultimately forcing Romani women to chose between their race and gender” (Oprea, 2005, p. 140).

In Europe, Roma are probably discriminated against more than any other group. They seem to be an invisible minority living on the fringes of European ‘mainstream’ society. The number of Roma in Europe is estimated between 10 and 12 million, with more than half of them in the EU, making them the largest minority in Europe by far. Most of the European Roma are of Indian origin, moving from country to country the last 1,000 years to escape persecution, like so many other minorities in Europe’s tumultuous history (ENAR-ERIO, 2011). However, European Roma are far from a homogeneous group in terms of origin, nationality, religion, culture or way of life. Perhaps the strongest element they have in common is the degree of discrimination that they face. This is even truer for the Roma women, who can face a double discrimination, based on their gender as well as on their ethnicity.

The current article focuses on identifying the main challenges and opportunities faced by Roma women with respect to access to education, employment, health care and housing in Czech Republic, Romania and Greece. The effect of the existing measures and policies is critiqued, and feedback from Roma women is collected with respect to their impact. In an attempt to work close to our target group, we have interviewed two representatives of the Roma women community in order to best identify the

most appropriate recommendations for changing and improving the condition of Roma women on the way to their full empowerment.

## **I. THEORETICAL APPROACHES: EMPOWERMENT, DISCRIMINATION, ROMA CULTURE, VALUES AND BEHAVIOURAL PATTERNS**

*To be disempowered means to be denied choice, while empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. In other words, empowerment entails change (Kabeer, 2005, p. 13).*

The process of *empowerment* can be regarded as an internal one, deeply rooted in the meaning, motivation, and purpose that individuals bring to their actions, along with the external actions of decision-making. It is about how people see themselves, thereby leading to other people's perception on them. The process also has external elements, such as the way in which resources are distributed. "If a woman's primary form of access to resources is as a dependent member of the family, her capacity to make strategic choices is likely to be limited" (Kabeer, 2005, p.15).

According to social psychology, *discrimination* refers to unjustifiable negative behaviour towards a group or its members, where behaviour is adjudged to include actions towards and judgements about, group members (Al Ramiah et al., 2010, p.85). Discrimination is closely linked with other social phenomena such as prejudice or stereotypes, but it is a distinct concept, and social psychologists are careful to emphasise the distinction. Discrimination can be fuelled by stereotypes and prejudice, but itself refers to an outcome behaviour, which is unfortunately very common in every part of the world and every sphere of life (Link & Phelan, 2001, p.365).

In addition, discrimination has many dire consequences that are often more pervasive and far-reaching than is commonly assumed. Other than the obvious issues with housing, education, healthcare and other fundamental human rights, various study findings show that the stigma of discrimination can lead to anxiety, stress and other problems related to mental well-being, to underperforming in professional and personal capacities, and to poorer health outcomes even if the same healthcare standards are provided (Al Ramiah et al., 2010, p.103).

One needs to tread carefully in assessing *Roma values and behaviours*, as a number of common myths and stereotypes have created an image of Roma society as extremely "primitive" and "backwards" (ENAR-ERIO, 2011). Modern studies show that masculine social values are quite

strong within the European Roma. This is reflected in various aspects of social life such as marriage, sexuality and domestic abuse. For example, nearly a third of Roma parents in Europe that prefer to get their daughter married before she completes basic education to make sure she does not start sexual life before the marriage. This proportion is quite high but not as high as Roma stereotypes seem to indicate. Still, it is roughly three times the percentage of non-Roma parents. However, there are staggering differences among Roma parents in these percentages if age and education are taken into account, so these masculine values are changing for younger and more educated people, especially for more educated Roma women (Cukrowska & Kocze, 2013, p.70).

Overall, masculine social values are still prominent within Roma society and culture, although there seems to be a pattern of change. Still, it would be extremely biased to attribute the prevalence of these values to some “inherent backwardness” of Roma culture or society as local media are sometimes quick to do (Petrova & Cahn, 2001, p.18). For a long time, similar masculine values were equally prominent in the non-Roma groups of the countries under study before they changed along with the shape of the societies in these countries (Beynon, 2002). As the Roma in these countries were generally excluded from the beneficial social developments, the continued prevalence of chauvinist values can be associated with the socioeconomic and educational lag that the Roma experience. This notion is supported by the findings that the impact of masculine values on Roma society is much weaker for better educated Roma, being roughly the same as that for non-Roma (Cukrowska & Kocze, 2013, p.69). In any case, the main victims of the prevalence of masculine values seem to be Roma women, who become the targets of multiple discrimination, both from within and from without Roma society (Ziomias, Bouzas & Spyropoulou, 2011, p.13).

Positive steps have been taken in the last years to address the issue of Roma women discrimination, both at domestic level, as well as at the international level. However, there is still much to be done with respect to their empowerment, a lengthy and challenging process. Of significant importance is the prioritization of Roma-related issues and of the empowerment of women on the international agenda. In this sense, the *Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015)*, a project supported by 12 participating countries – Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovakia and Spain (plus Slovenia and US as external observers), focuses on improving socio-economic conditions and inclusion for Roma population (ERRC, 2013). The priority areas are education, housing, employment and

health. Focus of the national projects is on self-employment and entrepreneurship by providing business skills trainings and promoting traditional Roma crafts (UNDP, 2006).

## **II. ROMA WOMEN AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION**

### **1. Main problems related to education and their impact on Roma women and girls**

Poverty, early marriages and giving birth at a young age have been identified as the main causes of school absenteeism and drop-out for Roma girls in Central and Eastern Europe by the UNDP/ILO Survey. This survey concluded, school attendance drops when “the opportunity costs of sending children to school rise in households with falling incomes” (UNDP, 2002, p. 54). Poverty and associated factors such as the health risks associated with poor-quality housing have also been identified as “possible causal factors for the lower educational status of Roma” (UNDP, 2006, p. 29).

#### ***1.1 Roma culture and its role on access to education***

In the framework of Roma culture and its impact on the development of Roma women, it is generally considered that an important source of discrimination stems from the Roma communities themselves being linked to the role of women in Roma culture and family structure (Corsi et al., 2008). In the traditional patriarchal Roma family, women are expected to assume a subordinate position and to be in charge of the family from as early as 11 years old. Early marriages of Roma girls, a widespread practice and the main intersectional ethnic-gender issue faced by them in Romania, have stirred up political, cultural and legislative debates. By entering early marriages, Roma girls are prevented from going to school and later on from entering the formal labour market, being expected to marry and to care for their families already since 15-16 years old. At the same time, divorce is not common among Roma women, both in traditional and more modern marriages (Corsi et al., 2008). In addition, lacking education and a secure job, Roma women face an increased vulnerability, especially if they lose the support and acceptance of their community, being thus exposed to illegal employment, trafficking in human beings or delinquency.

Based on the sample averages of working age individuals (16-64) of the 2011 UNDP/WB/EC regional survey on Roma communities, Roma males spend on average 6.71 years in education, while Roma women 5.66 years, significantly below the non-Roma population averages: 10.95 and 10.7. As a consequence, “Romani women are subject both to ethnic as well as gender gaps when it comes to the time spent in an educational system” (Cukrowska and Kóczé, 2013, p. 14).

Moreover, the difference in the average number of years spent in education between Roma and non-Roma women increases with age, possibly due to the fact that Roma are more likely to leave school. If Roma males aged 18-34 spend 6.5 years in the education system compared to Roma females who spend 5.8 years, in the 35-49 age group Roma males spend an average of 7 years in school while Romani females only 5.7 years (Cukrowska and Kóczé, 2013). Also, 28% of Romani women aged 16 to 64 have no formal level of education compared to 18% of Romani men and 2% of non-Romani women.

Consequently, dropout rates amongst Roma are more than three times higher than amongst non-Roma, with a slightly higher rate among Roma women compared to Roma men. Therefore, ethnicity seems to play a more important role than gender with respect to drop out rates, affecting Roma girls and boys equally. UNDP/WB/EC regional survey on Roma communities also highlights the fact that the differences in the literacy rate are mainly due to ethnicity, while gender is less obvious as a differentiating criteria, non-Roma women displaying slightly lower literacy rates than men (Cukrowska and Kóczé, 2013).

However, “culture is constantly negotiated and is multiple and contradictory” and Romani culture “is not constructed under ‘hermetically sealed’ boxes” (Volpp, *see* Oprea, 2005, p. 137). Notwithstanding the role of culture in the status of Roma women, Oprea (2005) draws attention to the risk of overestimating its role, while ignoring the importance of other factors, of turning a blind eye to the practices that are harmful to women within this group in the name of preserving cultural autonomy or criticizing in a way that portrays the entire culture as primitive.

Traditions related to early marriages of Roma girls and their level of education and access on the labour market are closely entangled in a vicious circle. On one hand, being expected to enter early marriages, Roma girls are prevented from going to school and later on from accessing the formal labour market. On the other hand, facing a double ethnic and gender discrimination, Roma girls lack equal treatment in schools and are highly discriminated against when it comes to employment; therefore, their families see no other

viable option for them than marriage and the role of care givers for their families.

There are also limits to education as a mean to women's empowerment, in the absence of a gender-awareness system and curricula. Thus, "in societies that are characterised by extreme forms of gender inequality ... where women's role in society is defined purely in reproductive terms, education is seen in terms of equipping girls to be better wives and mothers, or increasing their chances of getting a suitable husband" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 17). Moreover, gender stereotyping is reproduced in the school curricula and "can limit the development of the natural talents and abilities of boys and girls, women and men, in their educational and professional experiences as well as life opportunities in general" (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 9).

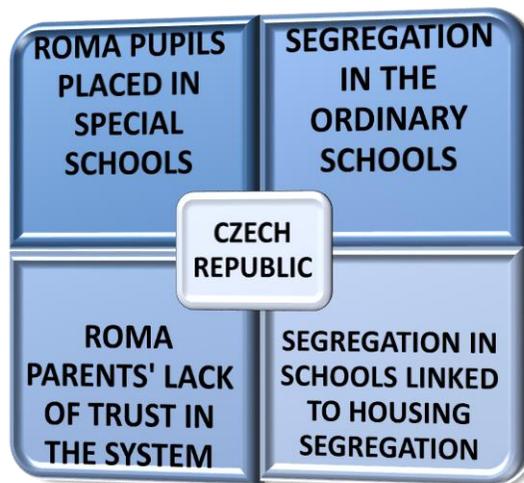
With respect to Roma, references to them are almost absent in the curricula, or quoted in pejorative contexts in the literature. However, steps have been taken in some countries to improve this situation. In Romania, topics such as the genocide of the Roma during the Second World War are being taught in schools and high schools.

### ***1.2 Czech Republic, Greece and Romania: Roma girls and women, and their access to education***

#### ***Czech Republic***

The most severe problems encountered by Roma girls, along with the Roma boys, regarding access to education are the overrepresentation of Roma pupils in special schools for children with mental disabilities, despite the absence of a disability, and the segregation of Roma pupils from the non-Roma in ordinary schools.

In the *D.H. and others v. the Czech Republic*, 2007, the European Court of Human Rights found violation of Art.14 (prohibition of

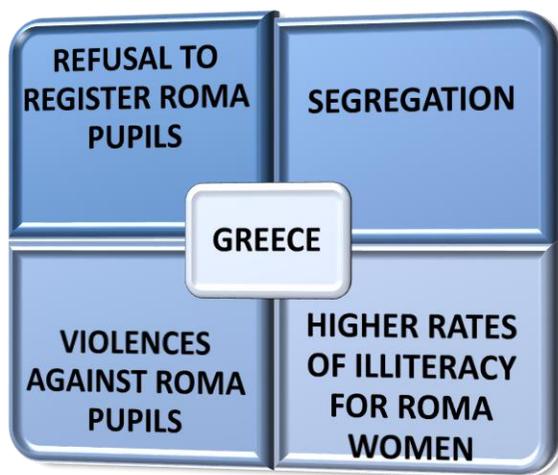


discrimination) in conjunction with Art.2 of Protocol No. 1 (right to education) of the European Convention of Human Rights: 18 applicants of Roma origin were discriminated against in the enjoyment of their right to education on account of their race or ethnic origin, being placed in special schools for children (*zvláštní školy*) for children with learning difficulties. The Court noted that the Czech authorities had admitted that in 1999 Roma pupils made up between 80 % and 90 % of the total number of pupils in some special schools. Moreover, although the exact percentage of Roma children in special schools at present is difficult to establish, their number is disproportionately high and Roma pupils represent the majority of the pupils in special schools (European Court of Human Rights, 2007). Placing Roma children in special schools for mentally disabled pupils prevents them from accessing good education and employment opportunities later on compared to the non-Roma children (European Roma Information Office, 2013; UNICEF, 2011; UNICEF, 2009).

Ordinary schools remain highly segregated. On one hand, segregation in schools is linked to housing segregation, with Roma communities and schools separated from the Czech ones. On the other hand, Roma parents do not trust the ordinary schools fearing that their children will be there subjected to discrimination and violence (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2009a, p. 27).

### *Greece*

Roma children are still confronted with the refusal of schools to enrol them, often under the pressure of non-Roma parents. Even when allowed to



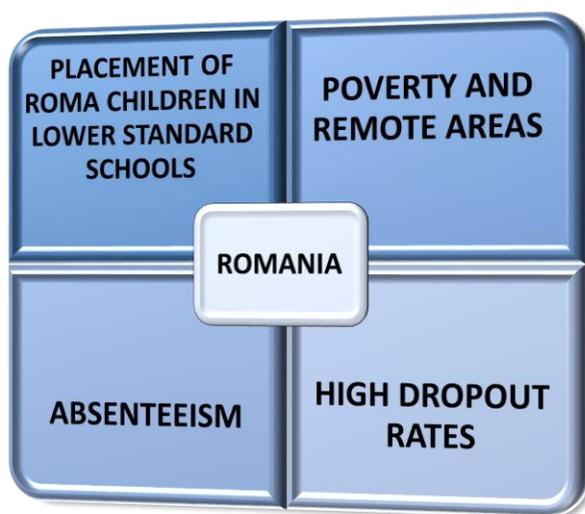
register, Roma children are placed in separate classes, increasing the segregation. In the *Sampanis and Others v. Greece*, 2005, the European Court of Human Rights found violation of Art.14 (prohibition of discrimination) in conjunction with Art.2 of Protocol No.

1 (right to education) of the European Convention of Human Rights: 11 applicants, Greek nationals of Roma origin, were refused enrolment in the primary school by the principals of two schools and were later on placed in special classes, in an annexe to the main Aspropyrgos primary school building, a measure which the applicants claimed was related to their Roma origin. The decision to segregate the Roma pupils followed the non-Roma parents' protests about the admission to primary school of Roma children and blockade of the school, demanding that the Roma children be transferred to another building, with the police intervening several times to prevent illegal acts being committed against pupils of Roma origin (European Court of Human Rights, 2008).

To highlight the impact of the intersection between ethnicity and gender on the level of education of Roma women, the European Commission found that in Greece, for example, Roma men have lower levels of illiteracy than Roma women since they are more exposed to an environment where they can learn how to read and write (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2009b).

### **Romania**

Roma pupils in Romania record high rates of dropout and absenteeism, although, according to European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2006), discrimination is not a reflection of institutional discrimination.



In this sense, it is worth mentioning that in the Notification no. 29323/20.04.2004, the Ministry of Education and Research has banned all forms of segregation in Romanian schools. School mediators facilitated the integration of Roma pupils, technical training was provided to

Roma children who have left school and dedicated places have been reserved for Roma students in Romanian universities. However, segregation still persists in practice, Roma pupils being often forced to attend lower standards schools or being placed in separate classes (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2006, p. 31).

Poverty and living in remote areas seem to be the main reasons hindering Roma children to attend school, despite the authorities' support measures. Moreover, as in the case of adults, many Roma children do not identify themselves as such and do not wish to study Roma language and history, facing a self-esteem problem (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2006). Negative attitudes on the side of teachers and colleagues still persist, or, in the words of Lia Gaudi, our Roma interview guest, "there are so many negative examples of Roma students fighting much more than many of the majority for their place in the academic environment, and the details of these stories, just make integration, tolerance, equality and 'peace among people' fade".

The main challenges faced by Roma girls and women with respect to education and schooling in Romania have been identified to be: some aspects of Roma culture and traditions, rejection by the society, general stereotypes among teachers and public policies.

### **III. ROMA WOMEN AND ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT**

The transition from socialist to market economy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has brought many changes and challenges to the population of the region. The income inequality and unemployment has risen and Roma people, particularly women, became even more vulnerable (O'Higgins, 2010; O'Higgins and Ivanov, 2006; Ringold *et al*, 2005). "Because of their low skills levels, as well as discrimination in the labour market, Roma were frequently among the first to be laid off; this has directly influenced Roma welfare" (Ringold *et al*, 2005, p. 38).

Since 2009, the economic crisis has resulted in the doubling of Roma unemployment, affecting mostly Roma women. Unemployment rates for Roma women are higher than for Roma men in most of the European countries (Cukrowska & Kocze, 2013) Although, measuring unemployment among Roma people might be a difficult task with respect to self-perceived unemployment, which is often much higher than the real unemployment (UNDP, 2002).

### **Main problems related to employment and their impact on Roma women and girls**

Based on an analysis of existing research on Roma and Roma women employment, the major issues faced by Roma women hindering their participation in labour market have been identified as lack of education, low levels of employability skills, low income, and participation in informal work.

Lack of education can be perceived as one of the main problems related to employment but also as the key source of the problem with disproportionate unemployment rates among Roma women and whole Roma population (O'Higgins, 2010, p. 164). Roma women are more likely to have a lower level of education than Roma men due to their involvement in childcare and other household activities. Therefore, due to traditional gender roles among Roma people, their future job prospects might be rather limited comparing to Roma men (UNDP, 2006). Lack of education presents a key obstacle in future job seeking (O'Higgins, 2010; O'Higgins & Ivanov, 2006) and number of years of schooling is commonly perceived as an important determinant of employment for Roma women, as educated women are more likely to look for employment than are Roma men (O'Higgins, 2010).

Low levels of employability skills closely relate to education and present one of the major hindrances in Roma women labour market participation (O'Higgins & Ivanov, 2006; UNDP, 2006; UNDP, 2002). Roma people often interpret rejection from job interview as discrimination rather than result of low employability skills. Under the Decade of Roma Inclusion, several programmes have been launched in participating countries aiming at improving employability skills of Roma population. Unfortunately, according to O'Higgins (2010), general mistrust in trainings among Roma population hinders such attempts.

According to Cukrowska & Kocze (2013), Roma women have significantly lower wages than non-Roma women and generally lower income than Roma men; however this trend varies country to country and type of job. Thus, Roma women contribute to the household income much less than do men. The gender pay gap is considerably higher among Roma population than non-Roma population. Besides low levels of education, the gap between male and female Roma population in employment might be caused by other activities and responsibilities of Roma women, such as childcare and household up-keeping (UNDP, 2006). Such activities are substantial part of traditional status of Roma women. The role of Roma man is to protect his family and to support his parents, while woman's role mainly lies in giving births, childcare and managing external family relations such as communication with school and official bodies (Magyari-Vincze, 2006, p. 28).

Long-term unemployment might be identified as the most visible impact of inactivity within the labour market. Generally long-term unemployment leads to loss of employability skills as well as potential loss of welfare benefits (ILO, 2014; O'Higgins & Ivanov, 2006), on which a large proportion of Roma population relies. With low income, the housing and health conditions of Roma families often deteriorate, presenting even more obstacles in future job seeking and thus creating a vicious circle. In order to save money on housing, Roma family might decide to move into a larger Roma community, which will commonly be segregated. Roma people living in mixed areas are more likely to find a job than those who live in segregated areas (UNDP, 2006). Roma women have generally more access to employment in urban rather than rural areas, particularly because of prevalence of traditional gender roles in rural areas (UNDP, 2006). Consequently, people living in rural areas might not have a formal address, and thus face additional issues when looking for a job.

Regarding limited access to healthcare, the majority of UNDP, 2002 respondents stated that the reason for their poor health is the inability to pay for medicines and insurance (UNDP, 2002). As a consequence of unemployment, Roma women might have more limited access to reproductive healthcare. A long-term consequence of this situation might be to hinder the reduction of poverty rates, and the combating of HIV/AIDS (Magyari-Vincze, 2006).

As a result of short or long-term unemployment, participation in the informal sector of economy might increase. Work in the informal sector is usually equated with very low wages, poor job quality and very low social protection (ILO, 2014; UNDP, 2006). Generally, Roma people tend to be more involved in the informal sector than other ethnic and social groups (UNDP, 2006). According to ILO (2014), women are more vulnerable within work in the informal sector than men, applying particularly for Roma women.

Increased participation in the informal sector causes asymmetrical participation in the state social welfare system. Thus Roma people who do not participate in the official sector of economy do not pay the required social taxes, which would in future cover their pensions and social benefits (UNDP, 2002). Therefore, Roma people might be active in accepting the benefits but passive in producing them (UNDP, 2002), and resulting in weak social protection (UNDP, 2006).

***Czech Republic, Greece and Romania: Roma girls and women, and their access to employment***

***Czech Republic***

The Czech government has not signed yet the Council of Europe Convention on violence against women, as “there is a general lack of political will to promote gender equality beyond issues of work-life balance and domestic violence” (European Women’s Lobby, 2013, p. 17).



Following the issues with respect to education in Czech Republic, Roma women very often do not possess the necessary employabil

ity skills. Demand for low skilled workers has been decreasing in Czech Republic; therefore training Roma women and improving their skills would be desired.

Some of the Czech media promote stereotyping of Roma minority by emphasizing their ethnic origin in criminal cases, and not producing any positive news related to Roma issues. Anti-Roma reporting in several Czech newspapers and online news, together with usage of anti-Roma catchphrases in pre-election slogans by some extreme political parties (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2009a), may further undermine the status of Roma people and hence decrease their chances to participate in the labour market. Potential prejudices of employers towards Roma candidates for jobs might be caused and increased by promoting stereotypes of Roma people on news. According to European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2009a), prejudices of employers towards Roma candidates remain high in Czech Republic and in many cases, Roma people are likely to be rejected from a job based on their ethnic background. Therefore, anti Roma reporting on news can have far reaching consequences.

Living in a segregated community has a significant impact on employment of Roma women due to lack of job opportunities and high levels

of unemployment in such localities. According to European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2009a), the unemployment among Roma population in segregated communities is reaching up to 90 %. Furthermore, most of the regions with large Roma communities are suffering from low average wages and low demand for unskilled or low skilled workers. Therefore, Roma women with lack of education and previous work experience are further hindered from access to formal employment.

### *Greece*

Since the crisis affected Greece, unemployment among women rapidly increased from 13.1 % in 2009 to 29 % in August 2012.



As one of the many consequences of the crisis, several cuts affecting education, healthcare and childcare have had a major impact on women

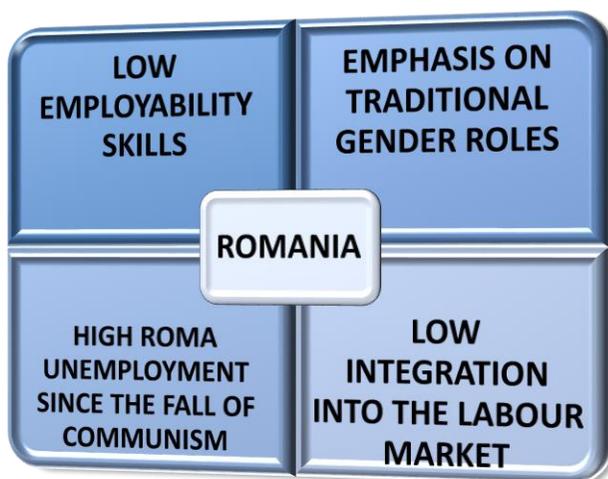
who are the primary beneficiaries of these essential services (European Women's Lobby, 2013). The Integrated Action Plan has been adopted aiming at improving the situation in the sphere of education, employment, health and housing.

The source of income for a majority of the Greek Roma population is garbage collection and very few are in formal employment (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2009b). Due to high unemployment and very low incomes of Roma families, many Roma people live in poverty in Greece which affects their access not only to employment but also to education and health care.

Similarly as in the other cases, due to low levels of education Roma women lack necessary qualifications and expertise to participate actively in the formal labour market in Greece.

**Romania**

During the communist era, Roma people were not able to practice their traditional crafts and were mostly employed in rural areas (Magyari-Vincze, 2006; Ringold *et al*, 2005).



Since 1990, the unemployment rate of the Roma population in Romania has grown. Also, after the collapse of communism, the general anti-Roma attitude in Romania has strengthened. Emphasis on restoring traditional roles in Romanian

society promoted by ecclesiastical institutions as well as conservative political parties applies successfully in rural areas of the country (Oprica, 2008). Thus Roma women with their strong traditional inclinations might also be influenced externally in turning their occupation preference into staying at home with children. According to Magyari-Vincze (2006), Roma girls in Romania do not usually graduate high school and leave education aged 13-15. In some Roma communities they are ready to get married at this age. By early marriages and interrupted education they are not developing and increasing their employability skills, thus consequently reducing their chances to participate in labour market and find permanent job.

The Romanian government has not presented many improvements that would guarantee the integration of the Roma population in the labour market (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2006). Since 2002, the unemployment rate has risen, but Romania still belongs to the countries with rather lower levels of Roma unemployment compared to Greece and Czech Republic. According to Women's Watch report, there are no positive developments towards women empowerment in Romania during the researched period of 2009-2012. Unfortunately, since 2010, rather negative developments are observable, such as the abolition of the National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men by the government and also the

closure of the National Agency for Family Protection (European Women's Lobby, 2013).

#### **IV. ROMA WOMEN AND ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE AND HOUSING**

##### **1. Main problems related to health and their impact on Roma women and girls**

An analysis of the available literature on the health issue of Roma in Europe (Foldes & Covaci, 2012) confirms that, clearly, Roma people suffer from poorer health and unhealthier living conditions compared to the majority populations in their home countries. Still, there is a need for better data in order to explain the Roma health gap and design better interventions to reduce it. However, such data does not seem to be easily available. For example, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia since 1989, researchers have largely turned away from health research on particular ethnic groups.

Available data show that Roma women in Europe report chronic illnesses more frequently than Roma men, but the same pattern is true for non-Roma and in fact the difference between women and men is double in the non-Roma case (Cukrowska & Kocze, 2013). Interestingly, reproductive health does not seem to be as much of a major issue as often assumed. In actuality, younger Roma women (aged 15-24) have higher rates of visiting a gynaecologist than non-Roma women, a trend that is reversed for the older generations and might be indicative of an improvement in health awareness among Roma. The same is true about the conditions of giving birth. Rates of childbirths attended by professionals tend to be very high for Roma women in most European countries, although in some countries, they are still extremely low (Cukrowska & Kocze, 2013, p.53). Overall, it seems that Roma health issues are directly connected to educational and economic issues. Lack of education can create a lack of awareness of health issues, which in turn can create an unwillingness to see a doctor. Even if awareness is present, however, the lack of financial resources and thus affordability of healthcare services is by far the main reason for not seeing a doctor when it is needed (Corsi et al., 2008, p.46).

## **2. Main problems related to housing and their impact on Roma women and girls**

Housing might be one of the most critical issues for the Roma of Europe and one of the most critical factors underpinning their exclusion from “mainstream” society. Everywhere across Europe, Roma continue to be one of the minorities most affected by inadequate housing conditions.

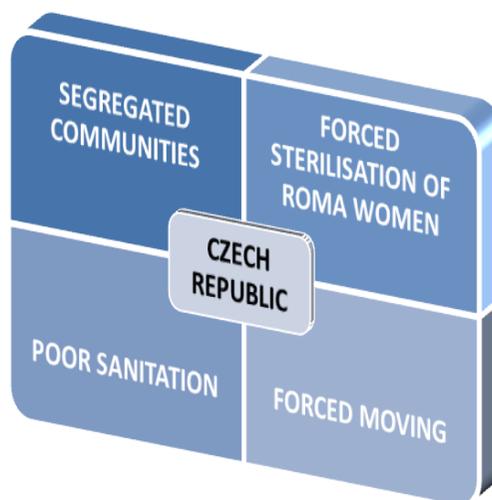
In many European countries, the authorities have failed to provide a social housing programme for the Roma, as has been done for other social groups, or are implementing it with limited results so far. The former is true for the Czech Republic (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2008) and the latter for Greece (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2009*b*). In addition, Roma are often evicted from even the poor housing they do have available, without authorities observing the common legal procedure, as is the case in Greece and Romania (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2006; Petrova & Cahn, 2001).

The negative impact of insecure and overcrowded housing on Roma is stronger for those who inhabit the worst possible housing options; ruined houses or slums, as the poor living conditions can affect the occurrence of chronic illnesses and their general health condition. In general, there is an expected disproportional presence of health problems among the Roma compared to non-Roma, such as the incidence of airways and lung diseases related to dampness or the effects of overcrowding on mental health, which are more likely to occur in substandard housing conditions. On one hand, men seem to suffer more in terms of their health than women, but on the other hand, women, because of the traditional gender roles that are often present in Roma families, remain at home for longer periods and are thus more exposed to the health risks of the substandard housing conditions, a fact that might mean that Roma women might be more affected by asthma and certain lung diseases than Roma men in most cases (Cukrowska & Kocze, 2013).

***Czech Republic, Greece and Romania: Roma girls and women, and their access to healthcare and housing***

***Czech Republic***

Between 1972 and 1991, the Czechoslovak and then the Czech government supported and encouraged sterilisations of Roma women, a policy aimed at reducing the Roma population. The majority of such sterilisations had been undertaken without the women's knowledge and permission. In 2004, an investigation was opened based on Roma women's complaints. During the investigation several legal

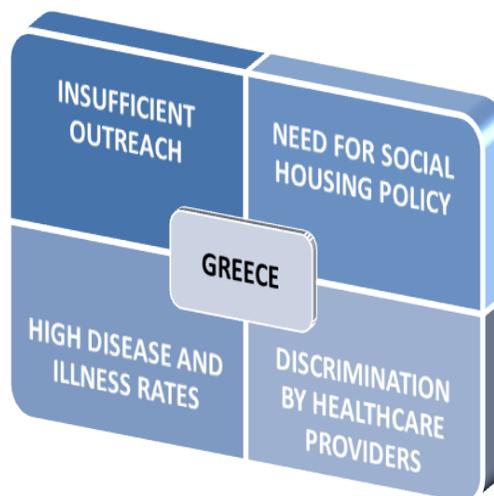


loops were found with consent process Roma women being forced to sign the agreement to undergo sterilisation. Nevertheless, no woman has yet received a formal apology or compensation. Proposal for compensations (Approximately 200,000 CZK – around 7,300 Euro per case) should be introduced soon (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2009a; European Roma Rights Centre, 2013).

According to EC/UNDP/WB 2011 survey, very small fraction of the Roma population resides in their own property. Segregation from non-Roma communities is still a major issue. Almost one quarter of the total Roma population lives in very poor conditions such as ruined houses or slums, resulting in frequent sanitation issues, and half is under a serious threat of eviction (European Roma Rights Centre, 2013). Children of many evicted families are being taken into institutional care if the family “does not have roof over their head” (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2009a). Even if a more lenient eviction policy was enforced, that would not resolve things as the living conditions in these slums are a major health hazard. Some kind of social housing policy is needed to provide a long term solution for this forced moving issue.

### *Greece*

Most Roma who live in settlements continue to earn their income from scrap and garbage collection, which poses a major threat to their health. Poor housing conditions also aggravate the situation, although Socio-Medical Centres, providing basic health care services such as primary health care and vaccination in Roma settlements have been created. Greek Roma have



higher rates of disease and ill health, higher rates of child mortality and lower life expectation than non-Roma. These health issues are connected to the socioeconomic and educational profile of the Greek Roma, as well as to discrimination against them by healthcare providers (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2011, p.14).

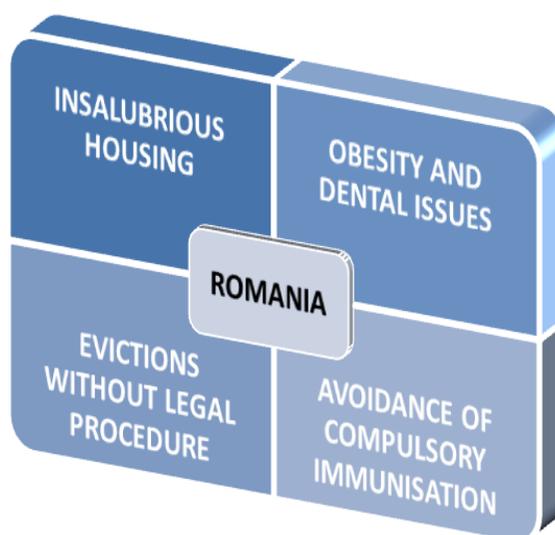
The Roma population is scattered all over Greece, with the greatest concentration found in the areas in or around major urban centres, as well as in rural regions that present the most employment opportunities. Contrary to the popular myth that Roma are nomadic (ENAR-ERIO, 2011), recent surveys tend to show that Greek Roma have lived in more or less the same places in the past 15 or 20 years, so the vast majority of them are settled with regards to their living situation. On the other hand, Greek Roma usually live in specific areas, neighbourhoods, suburbs, villages or communities, mostly in isolation from non-Roma, a fact that may be reinforcing their social exclusion (Ziomas, Bouzas & Spyropoulou, 2011, p.6). Housing seems to be the fundamental problem, as roughly half or more than half of the Greek Roma population lives in makeshift accommodation without basic forms of infrastructure. The housing issue is also a main obstacle in any effort towards social inclusion and improvement in the standard of living. Some social housing policy is urgently needed.

In the last few years, despite the Decade of Roma Inclusion initiative running since 2005, there is no official policy framework or any governance arrangements for addressing Roma poverty and social exclusion in Greece (Ziomas, Bouzas & Spyropoulou, 2011). On the other hand, some programmes and initiatives are under way. Housing loans allowing Roma

families to purchase their own houses or apartments are available at extremely low interest rates and extremely beneficial conditions as was the case for the Greeks of the former USSR who emigrated in the 1990s. Unlike that case, however, the participation of the Roma themselves in the scheme has been limited, with outreach proving insufficient (Ziomas, Bouzas & Spyropoulou, 2011). The Greek National Reform Programme 2011-2014, is processing a medium and long term strategy for the social inclusion of Roma, the Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013 includes many actions for vulnerable social groups including the Roma, and various separate independent projects are under way, including the “Progress” EU project, targeted specifically on Roma women and gender mainstreaming in Greek municipalities (Skoulas et al., 2012). Perhaps the challenge lies in promoting these actions and initiatives and encouraging participation of the Roma in them.

### **Romania**

More than half of the Roma population in Romania suffers from obesity and dental issues. Majority of children do not have the compulsory immunizations, which might result in further health problems and an increase of child mortality. Furthermore, absence of identity documents usually limits access to



healthcare. Since 1996 in Romania, the Health mediation programme, with its focus on health has played a significant role in the empowerment of Roma women. The programme aims to improve access to health care for Roma women, provide health education, child vaccination and many other improvements (Roma Health Mediation in Romania, 2013).

According to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance Report, some members of the Roma minority continue to live in unhealthy housing, often as a result of discriminatory measures by local

authorities. Furthermore, Roma are sometimes unlawfully evicted from their housing, even in the middle of winter and in the presence of the media, without the observation of legal procedures (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2006, p.37). Also, Roma continue to live in segregated communities, which has a major impact on access to better schools and mobility for employment.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although positive steps have been taken in all three countries to improve the situation of women in general and of Roma in particular, in practice, Roma girls and women still face discrimination with respect to equal access to education, employment, health care and housing. Every improvement is significant, but the main issues faced by Roma women still remain unresolved. Roma girls spend fewer years in schools than Roma boys due to the fact that they are expected to take up the role of care givers and even to enter early marriages from the age of 11 and they display high dropout rates. Low levels of education and early marriages hinder access to employment for Roma women and girls due to deficiency of necessary skills and qualifications. Furthermore, living in a segregated community presents an additional challenge considering extreme unemployment and often poor housing conditions in such areas. Roma girls might be more exposed to traditional roles while living in segregated communities and due to the lack of education and contact with other cultures, they might be forced to enter marriage and start family life at a very young age. Doing so, Roma girls might be entering a vicious circle of reliance on welfare benefits, inability to participate in the labour market and hence incompetence to pay taxes.

Moreover, there seems to be no prospect of these issues being resolved in the near future. Even recent legislation and policies are most often designed in a top-down approach, with little or no consultation and direct involvement of the Roma community. Roma culture is sometimes considered to be responsible for the failure of the programmes and policies implemented, ignoring the fact that it is often a reaction to a hostile society and to the lack of trust in the system and in the majority population, or at least to poorly designed policies that claim to be helping the Roma without taking their specific needs and conditions into account. In practical terms, this results in a waste of resources and effort with little effect on the quality of life of the target population.

What is needed to produce a real impact is a different approach: a bottom-up initiative taking place within Roma communities, both geographically and organisationally, so that two common drawbacks of the existing approaches, information not reaching the beneficiaries and lack of active Roma involvement, can be surpassed. In addition, for this initiative to prove more successful than the previous ones, a number of prerequisites are necessary, such as proper information about the status and needs of the beneficiaries, which must be collected as part of preliminary research, and also political will and continuous and stable funding. If these requirements are met then an innovative, active, bottom-up project has a fair chance of succeeding where previous initiatives have failed and making an actual difference for one of the most discriminated-against groups in Europe.

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## APPENDIX

### SUMMARIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH ROMA WOMEN<sup>1</sup>

#### **Participant 1 – Lia Gaudi, Roma woman from Romania**

Lia is a very well educated lady from Romania with a vast experience of working with Roma people. We can say that she represents a prototype of very strong Roma woman and could be an example for many other women. As a Roma woman, she has not experienced many difficulties at school but admits that Roma children usually have to usually work harder than others. Her parents were supportive in her educational and life choices. In her opinion, the main challenges for Roma girls are traditions to some extent, stereotypes and rejection by the society. She also appreciates the affirmative measures in Romania, helping Roma students to have access to education.

However, Lia admits that her case is a happy one, that there are many negative examples of Roma students fighting much more than many of the majority for their place in the academic environment.

To empower Roma women, Lia suggests following bottom up approach and direct work with Roma women and listening to their needs. With regards to health, there are observable issues particularly lack of health insurance, but our participant has not experienced any problems.

#### **Participant 2 – Roma woman from Romania**

The interview has been conducted with a Romanian Roma woman who lives and works in Greece. The semi-structured qualitative interview consisted of 14 open questions covering the issues with education, employment, health and housing. The participant has completed 12 years of schooling unlike her siblings who completed only 2-4 years, and her mother who is almost illiterate and never attended school. The participant has left her house at aged 12, to continue her studies with great support of a teacher who accommodated her and supported her in return for help in the household.

Regarding employment, the respondent has been active in labour market since age of 12, to support herself while attending high school. After completing high school the participant left Romania for Greece, where problems with finding employment were not experienced.

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<sup>1</sup> For full text interviews, please see our dedicated blog: <http://wrestproject.blogspot.gr/>

With respect to housing issues, the participant has lived in a shared house with extended family, noting that nowadays it is extremely difficult for young people to find decent and affordable accommodation. Access to healthcare has never been an issue.

The respondent got married recently to non-Roma man and is planning to leave Greece for the United Kingdom to start “better life”.