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on Gender Aspects of the European Framework of National Roma Inclusion Strategies

Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality

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United in diversity

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1. Lessons of the first stage of the European Framework for National Roma Inclusion Strategies

If we compare the figures presented by the United Nations Development Programme in 2003¹ with the findings of the 2011 FRA-UNDP report² and the joint UNDP/World Bank/EC regional Roma survey conducted in the same year, we can see that Roma communities continue to face persistent joblessness, segregated education, unhealthy living conditions, terrible health care situation, political underrepresentation and geographical isolation. These data - and not in the least the experiences of Roma communities themselves - are a living proof for the inadequacy of previous inclusion programmes that were scattered among policy fields, underfinanced and lacked Roma involvement; to mention but a few shortcomings. For that reason, 2011 saw the launch of the first EU-level effort for Roma inclusion, which is so far the most promising initiative to ease the marginalization of Roma.

The initial implementation of the European Framework for National Roma Inclusion Strategies however revealed some significant flaws that result from its opaque governance structure, unclear objectives, decreasing official engagement and inadequate financing. It is a general impression among civil stakeholders of the European Roma inclusion process that despite the significant output on behalf of EU institutions, there is little impact on the field. Besides the identified gaps and weaknesses in national action plans, it is also due to the lack of a well-functioning multi-level governance, and the lack of systematic European cooperation standards that would ensure expected outcomes to be explicitly stated and continuously improved with reference to the changing requirements of society and economy. Despite - or rather due to - the involvement of several actors, the control and governance of the Framework is not well-defined and it is hard to determine who exactly is responsible for the Framework's success or failure and to what extent, leaving the process without adequate guidance and quality control.

The obvious inclination of both Member States and the European Commission to 'outsource' related measures to NGOs and international organizations - that act on behalf of Roma, but without practically any Roma involvement - is also of concern. It risks giving up policy control and insight on the one hand and on the other hand allocates responsibilities to outsiders, who have no legal responsibility for social inclusion. Moreover, in the absence of formalized guidelines that the actors would be held accountable for, these organizations are left with too much room for manoeuvre. It leaves the shape and intensity of Roma inclusion efforts to rest upon the degree of the voluntary involvement and discretion of the stakeholders. This also risks the continuation of 'business of usual' in Roma inclusion, namely the practice of allocating an unreasonably high amount of assets for staff salaries and the blurring of responsibilities resulting in organizations acting as 'double agents': allocating and performing tasks at the same time, or doing both implementation and monitoring themselves. As a result, programmes tend to be unsystematic, impact assessments are inadequate and projects often

¹ http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/regional/europethecis/Avoiding_the_Dependency_Trap_EN.pdf

² http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/2099-FRA-2012-Roma-at-a-glance_EN.pdf

overlap with earlier initiatives without clearly defining their outcomes, on the basis of which they are chosen for continuation or upscale. In addition, the high political support has also dropped in the Council since the Hungarian presidency, due to the unfortunate - although incidental - succession of presidencies that is held by countries with insignificant or no Roma population.

The rapporteur is convinced that the lack of concrete objectives and targets, as well as the lack of incentives or sanctions risks the translation of the Framework's original concept into tangible results in the field. Furthermore, most of the indicators utilized to measure improvement fail to account for both implementation and policy. Just examining one over the other is an incomplete analysis, since at times implementation and actual policy initiatives can be at odds with each other. In general terms, although some measures have been introduced under each of the Framework's priority fields, it continues to move in an unsustainable direction and risks missing most of its targets.

The efficiency of the Strategy could be increased by an enhanced involvement of the European Commission, for it has a considerable potential to improve the quality of regulation and other instruments, encourage greater policy coherence and promote the overarching goals of the Framework. The rapporteur believes that parallel and overlapping efforts need to be smoothed out in the structural and organizational level, but most importantly it must be prevented to loose control over the framework in an 'institutional no man's land'. It would be very helpful also for policy planning and evaluation if the Commission would present a clear flow chart of the EU Roma inclusion process, showing the achievements, the action box of the required objectives and the specific measures realizing them, the momentary state of play of the implementation measures and the next steps to be taken, as well as an unambiguous assessment on how local initiatives and national action plans all feed into the fulfilment of community goals.

The Framework's objectives should be supported by a limited number of - indicative or rather self-binding - priority targets in order to present clear and unambiguous outputs against which progress can be measured. It is highly recommended therefore to seek common, comparable and reliable indicators and develop a set of EU Roma Indicators to present a realistic analysis of progress and to meet the requirement of effective monitoring. The Commission should furthermore urge Member States to present numerical headline targets in their national strategies for the main priority areas as well as endeavour to produce - based on the dashboard of indicators, the data provided by Member States and the exchange of experiences - more comprehensive EU Roma reports in the future.

After the clear and very disappointing failure of the Decade of Roma Inclusion initiative, it would be an irreparable mistake to let the Framework to be downgraded into superficial window-dressing. Or even worse: a private business area, where a very few earn well, while we are loosing another generation of Roma who sink deeper into social exclusion.

Furthermore, the socio-economic inclusion of Roma - so that their figures could approach the regional average - would not only respond to the demographic challenge of the increasing elderly and decreasing working age populations, but could also trigger a substantial economic growth.

2. The particular situation of Roma women

For more than four years now, Europe has been undergoing a long-drawn economic crisis that has hit citizens with unprecedented levels of unemployment, as well as the direct risk of social exclusion. Moreover, the number of women living in poverty has risen disproportionately in relation to the number of men, women form the majority of all groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion and experience disadvantages on a number of grounds that intersect with gender.

In this light Roma women can be identified as probably the most vulnerable group in the EU, who have a higher incidence of poverty than Roma men. Roma women of special needs - such as disabled and elderly Roma women, those bringing up a child without a partner (single mothers and widows with dependent children) or those growing up in foster homes - are extremely vulnerable to social exclusion and marginalization. Yet, gender equality is either not an explicit objective of the National Roma Inclusion Strategies or is addressed in an incidental and inconsistent way.

The rapporteur believes that the best means to combat the poverty of Roma women is employment. In disadvantaged rural areas however – where the majority of Roma live - women often work in the informal economy, they are not registered on the official labour market, or have short-term contracts typically in public employment, which raises serious concerns regarding their social rights, such as rights during pregnancy, maternity leave, the acquisition of pension and access to social security. Furthermore, the unregulated, insecure, and often semi-legal nature of many Roma women's work leaves them unprotected against exploitation and they - especially mothers - find it harder than men to accept a job further away from home because of family responsibilities and limited access to public transport.

In gender studies, the distribution of time devoted to paid work versus unpaid domestic and family work is a frequent indicator of gender equality in society and in traditional Roma communities domestic and care work are often assigned exclusively to women, removing them prematurely from education and employment. Roma women also often leave the labour market because childcare facilities are unavailable, too expensive, inaccessible, or inadequate. Expenditure cuts to support services in socio-economically disadvantaged communities result in a greater reliance on women, and care work is shifted to the private sphere. As the family income decreases, the double burden on Roma women for both paid work and care pushes them to undertake intensive, unofficial and precarious work, as well as mini jobs, 'false' part-time jobs and in-work poverty trap and it is evident that parental poverty leads to child poverty and seriously affects children later in life. Social security systems are furthermore based on the principle of continuous remunerated employment, a requirement that most elderly Roma women are unable to fulfil due to the frequent interruptions and the unofficial or temporary nature of their work and are therefore not entitled to pensions or only below the minimum subsistence level.

The crisis also had a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of Roma women,

aggravating their long unacceptable situation due to unemployment, impoverishment, inadequate housing conditions and family disruptions. Partly due their low socio-economic status and partly due to the discrimination they face in health care, Roma women resort to medical services much less than the majority population. Although most Member States have provisions for breast and cervical cancer screening, their accessibility is often questionable, as is the case for antenatal care and childbirth services, especially in rural regions. The rapporteur is convinced that Roma women should be an explicit target group of EU health initiatives, especially with respect to diseases, which are linked to the female hormonal system and are aggravated by poverty, such as osteoporosis, musculoskeletal problems and central nervous system illnesses like Alzheimer and/or dementia. There is a significant gender gap also in terms of mental illnesses due to traditional gender roles and gender inequalities, that make depression for example exponentially prevalent among Roma women. Reducing health inequalities should therefore be a primary objective, recognizing that both ethnicity and gender are important determining factors.

The report also intends to address other serious social problems that emerge in close connection with marginalization and extreme poverty - and thereby affect Roma women disproportionately -, such as human trafficking, domestic violence and early or forced marriages. Research data show¹ that Roma women and children are most represented among the victims of all kinds of human trafficking - such as sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, domestic servitude, organ trafficking, illegal adoption and begging -, and regardless of whether it is cross-border or internal trafficking. There is also evidence of domestic violence in Roma families, rising parallel with the growing of poverty and existential insecurity. The perceived greater vulnerability of Roma women mostly stems directly from their excessive overrepresentation among those in poverty and social exclusion or indirectly through unemployment, inadequate education, homelessness, domestic violence, growing up in state care or early school leaving.

For the above reasons the report will focus on the specific situation and needs of Roma women in the European Union and will present specific recommendations on how the European Framework for National Roma Inclusion Strategies may better foster their socio-economic inclusion.

¹ <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/breaking-the-silence-19-march-2011.pdf> or <http://www.osce.org/odihr/20911>