

Romani women's voices continue to be absent from national strategy documents on social inclusion

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Romani women's voices continue to be absent from national strategy documents on social inclusion

Salomea Popoviciu și Cristian Tileagă

Rezumat:

Vocile romilor din diferite comunități ne amintesc de lupta zilnică a comunităților de romi cu sărăcia și rasismul. Această lucrare susține că, deși documentele de strategie națională urmăresc includerea romilor în societatea mai largă (Comisia Europeană, 2011), ele continuă să excludă perspectivele femeilor rome, fiind elaborate într-un mod non-participativ.

Cuvinte cheie: Etnie roma, feminism, incluziune socială

Abstract:

Romani voices across diverse communities remind us of the daily struggle of Roma communities with destitution and racism. This paper argues that although national strategy documents aim to include Roma people within the broader society (European Commission, 2011), they continue to exclude the perspectives of Romani women by drafting them in a non-participatory manner.

Keywords: Roma ethnic, feminism, social inclusion

Romani voices across diverse communities remind us of the daily struggle of Roma communities with destitution and racism. This paper argues that although national strategy documents aim to include Roma people within the broader society (European Commission, 2011), they continue to exclude the perspectives of Romani women by drafting them in a non-participatory manner. Roma voices in general and Roma women's voices in particular, should be an integral part of the strategic political agenda. Yet, Roma women are still not represented in the national parliaments of EU countries, and their voices continue to be conspicuously absent from key policymaking debates on the Romani predicament.

Roma inclusion is important for national governments partly because Roma people are the biggest ethnic minority in Europe, with approximately six million living in the EU (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018). Also, and more importantly, the majority experience poverty, marginalization, exclusion, prejudice and discrimination (European Commission, 2011). For the last few decades the inclusion of Roma people has been on the agenda of the national governments of all of the EU member states. This year, perhaps to a larger extent than previous years, we have also seen and heard the voices of Romani women embracing feminism and challenging stereotypes through art, music and dance (Meaker, 2018). However, their political representation continues to be virtually non-existent.



The Roma form a heterogeneous group of people that often face discrimination, segregation, and inadequate access to services. Photo: Pixabay, open source.

According to Verloo (2005), the perspectives and experiences of both members of the civil society and experts add an important contribution to the policy debates concerning equality and inclusion, and can lead to the empowerment of the historically marginalized and oppressed (Verloo, 2005). Also, feminist preoccupations bring novel insights into the discussions about ethnic inclusion, such as concerns about power structures and the ways in which class, race and gender intersect to create disadvantaged and discriminated groups. (Surdu & Surdu, 2006).

Studies show that there is a deep-seated ambivalence towards the Roma. For example, a 2008 investigation into museum portrayal of 'the Gypsy woman' reveals that the representation of Gypsies reinforces the stereotypical idea that Roma belong to an 'orgiastic space-time out of line with normality' (Hasdeu, 2008, p. 350).



Mainstream perception of Roma as a group that defies societal systems. Photo: Pixabay, open source.

The attitudinal positions and practices towards Roma cover diverse nuances—from tolerant and compassionate to paternalistic and, in extreme circumstances, eliminationist (Tileagă, 2016). Ambivalence towards Roma spans the political spectrum. The perception of the Roma advanced by

the Romanian strategy documents for Roma inclusion is that the Roma are a group which defies the dominant societal systems of housing, education, labour and employment. In Romania, but also in other European countries this is not a minority perception: it is part of the mainstream. For example, Marinaro (2010), notes that in Italy, public policies portrayed Roma people as a threat to the security of the mainstream population. This led to a tighter police control in communities with a large number of Roma people, and increased surveillance in nomad camps. Similar arguments about the undesirable or delinquent behaviour of Roma people were found in France (Nacu, 2011), Germany (Lucassen, 1997), Finland (Ternoven & Enache, 2017), Sweden (Lindstrom, 2015) and the UK (Grill, 2012).

Such arguments lead to social policies that attempt to manage Roma without recognizing the diversity of the Roma and through public policies that embed to various degrees social hegemony (Nicolae, 2012). For example, the Romanian strategy for Roma inclusion for up to 2020 aims to provide Roma people with equal, free and universal access to quality education in order to support economic growth and the development of the knowledge based society (Guvernul Romaniei - HG 18/2015, 2015). However, in practice, although materials about Roma culture and history exist in a variety of languages including Romanian, the educational curriculum does not include them (see for example, Council of Europe, 2018).

This result can be seen in terms of ignoring and silencing of minority voices on a structural level (Schröter, 2013). Moreover, by excluding the non-hegemonic voices of Roma women, policy documents for Roma inclusion contribute to the maintenance of cultural and ethnical hegemony. The integration of Roma feminist perspectives in the debates about Roma inclusion is crucial to the democratic process of policymaking and policy implementation.

Collaboration with heterogeneous categories of people with various life experiences allows for a sharper focus on diversity by policies that aim to create equality in outcomes between individuals and groups of people. Neaga (2016) suggests two ways in which feminist perspectives can be incorporated into the public agenda. Firstly, Roma women's organizations can work to close the gap between a progressive feminist ideology and the traditional and patriarchal Roma community. Secondly, Roma women organizations can strengthen their cooperation with feminist organizations. This cooperation already exists. For example, the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration offers a doctoral program focusing on Roma issues, providing a platform for Roma women to construct their own discourses about feminism, empowerment and inclusion (for more information see: <http://www.politice.ro/en/research-centers>). Similar programs for graduate level can be found in other European countries such as Hungary (for more information see: <https://www.ceu.edu/unit/romani-studies-program>), the UK (for more information see: <https://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk//index.shtml>), and Sweden (for more information see: <https://www.sh.se/nairs>). These initiatives can pave the way for Roma feminism to be incorporated within the political discourse.

Future national strategy documents should offer a strong rebuttal of ethnic stereotyping and discrimination of Romani women, a fair assessment of their challenges voiced by Romani women themselves, and tailored measures to their varied aspirations as women. Specifically, both the national strategy documents for Roma inclusion and Roma community associations should include feminist perspectives, avoid homogenizing Roma people, develop diverse educational curricula on Roma history and culture, promote a culture that moves away from the patriarchal roles found in many Roma communities and focus on drafting participatory social policies.

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