

Oral Statement on the current situation of Romani women in Serbia by the European Roma Rights Centre, Bibija, Eureka and Women's Space

Honourable Committee Members,

We thank you for the opportunity to present information on the worrying situation of Romani women in Serbia. Romani women in Serbia face serious problems pertaining to their status within society as well as within their domestic and family environments. Discrimination in access to education, health care, employment and issues of violence are amongst the main problems experienced by Romani women in Serbia. The living conditions of Romani women in Serbia are extremely inadequate as a result of substandard housing and poverty.

Although the Serbian State has joined the Decade of Roma Inclusion, an international initiative to improve the situation of Roma by 2015, the near total absence of information in the State report on Romani women can be seen as indicative of the lack of political will to improve their current situation.

Law and Policy Environment

There is currently an enormous dearth of information, disaggregated by gender and ethnicity, which would be necessary to design, implement and evaluate effective policies which address the actual needs of vulnerable groups, such as Romani women. Policies and strategies adopted thus far by the Serbian Government to improve the socio-economic position of Roma have so far proved insufficient for Romani women. This can be seen as a consequence of said policies having been drafted in the absence of crucial data. Existing policies and strategies almost completely lack a gender perspective that take account of the particular situation and needs of Romani women.

Furthermore, the Serbia government has to date failed to adopt a comprehensive anti-discrimination law, in line with European Community law and international anti-discrimination standards, addressing in particular the effects of multiple forms of discrimination experienced by women from minority groups.

We therefore recommend that:

- In order to redress the situation of Romani women in Serbia, in close cooperation with Romani non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders, and taking as a basis existing relevant data, the Serbian government must systematically collect and make available in a form readily-comprehensible to the public data disaggregated by sex and ethnicity in areas of relevance to the social inclusion of Romani women so that adequate policies and laws can be formulated and their impact measured.
- Further, as a matter of urgency, the Serbian government should adopt and give effect to comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation banning discrimination in all its forms along the lines of gender and ethnicity, amongst others, and which also acts to combat multiple discrimination. Particular effort should be made to provide

mechanisms to ensure real and effective remedy in cases of discrimination against Romani women, including effective and dissuasive sanctions for perpetrators and adequate damages for victims.

- Ensure the meaningful participation of Romani women in relevant Roma-related and women-related decision making processes.

Violence Against Women

Violence against Romani women in Serbia is systematic and widespread and takes place both outside and within the Romani community. Violence is exacerbated by a lack of mutual trust between Romani women and the police which results in an extremely low rate of incident reporting by victims and inaction by the police when the incident is reported. Romani women who do report cases of violence at times meet further abuse by the police and/or the batterer. 75% of our respondents that answered questions about violence during research stated that they had been victim to violence at some point in their lives in different areas and spheres of life. In only 10 of these cases did the Romani woman feel she could contact the authorities. Of these 10 women, 6 that the authorities had abandoned them to the perpetrators, and generally did not adequately help them.

The high rate of violence against Romani women is often linked to lack of housing alternatives, education and employment.

Outside the Romani community, violence against Romani women often takes the form of neo-Nazi attacks. Perpetrators of such attacks are rarely adequately punished, and Romani victims rarely receive adequate compensation.

Within the community, violence against women often takes the form of domestic violence. The most reported forms of domestic violence were physical and verbal abuse by family members. Romani women victims of domestic violence rarely seek medical help for their injuries out of shame as they are unwilling to reveal to the medical practitioner that the perpetrator of their injuries is a family member.

The Serbian government has failed to create an adequate environment in which female victims of violence can seek assistance or an effective support network through which victims can obtain help and report cases of violence.

Furthermore, the admission criteria for some state funded safe houses create a situation whereby women in need of safety and protection would be unable to enter. Entrance requirements, for example, include that the woman be employed, have completed secondary school education, and in some cases the receipt of social benefits eliminates the possibility of entrance to the safe house. Due to the dire socio-economic position of Romani women, members of this vulnerable group are disproportionately impacted by such criteria, which effectively result in the inability of Romani women experiencing violence to seek refuge in safe houses.

Given the problems highlighted in this area, we recommend that:

- The Serbia government should encourage victims of violence, and especially Romani women, to seek assistance and bring complaints against the perpetrators of violence, such as through awareness raising about recourses and the use of mechanisms provided by specialised bodies, with assurances that confidentiality will not be compromised on account of bringing a claim.
- The Serbian government should ensure the implementation of effective procedural guidelines for assisting victims of domestic and other forms of violence, and train law enforcement officials and other relevant state actors to adequately and sensitively act in cases of violence against women.
- Law enforcement officials and other state actors which assist victims of violence should be provided with anti-racism and anti-discrimination training in order to effectively assist Romani women, and other women from disadvantaged groups, experiencing violence.
- Without delay, Serbian officials must review and amend admission criteria for safe houses as necessary so that victims of domestic violence from disadvantaged groups are able to access such.
- The Serbian government should widely publicise the outcomes of these measures as a step towards increasing trust in state officials and processes to encourage Romani women to report incidents of violence and seek assistance.

Access to Education

Romani women face a number of barriers in accessing education as indicated by higher illiteracy rates among Romani women compared to Romani men and significantly higher compared to non-Romani men and women. Barriers to education commonly faced by Romani women are based on high rates of poverty and patriarchal traditions which result in lower expectations for Romani girls to complete education. Romani girls are burdened with family obligations from a very early age. Also, the tradition of virginity testing often results in the girl being withdraw from school by her family when she reaches puberty to limit her contact with her male school mates. Patriarchal traditions are also manifested in traditional gender roles and lower expectations for Romani girls which have a negative impact on their chances in life. Furthermore, these patriarchal traditions are used by the government to blame Roma for their own situation and as an excuse to not take action. These combined processes leave Romani girls in the desperate situation of not having adequate support from either their own communities or from the State.

These obstacles are further exacerbated by the common practise of Serbian education authorities placing Romani children in special schools for the mentally disabled. Romani children are often wrongly placed in such schools on the basis of inadequate categorising by medical commissions and the lack of economic opportunities that force Romani families to send their children to special schools which pose lower expenses to the family.

In some regular schools, school authorities and teachers segregate Romani children along ethnic lines in Roma only classes. In other cases, they are forced to sit at the back of the classroom thereby physically separating them from the rest of the students.

Romani girls are often the target of inhuman and degrading treatment in the form of verbal and physical abuse based on gender and ethnicity by school authorities, teachers and their classmates. Romani girls are often ridiculed by their peers and teachers who make them feel that they do not belong in school and that the only place they belong is at home. These practices are rarely punished by teachers and other officials, even when reported by Romani parents.

Lack of personal identity and house registration documents needed in order to enrol in school are fundamental barriers for Romani children's access to education. Language barriers and lack of positive models are still prevalent among large sectors of the Romani community and result in a further barrier for Romani girls to access education.

In light of the above, we recommend that the Serbian government:

- Take measures to motivate Romani parents to enrol their children, and especially Romani girls, in school in order to overcome the negative effects of patriarchal traditions.
- Support effective counselling services for youth in education institutions and NGO's, which should also educate Roma on relevant legal provisions as a way to negate prevent child marriages and other traditional practices that negatively effect the access of Romani girls and youth to education.
- Establish co-operation between parents, teachers and pupils to put and end to school harassment and other forms of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and/or gender (and any other grounds). Specific training and information for all pupils, parents and school workers/officials, on the basis of clear guidelines and disciplinary procedures should be provided, to eliminate such phenomenon.
- Scholarships should be made available, including subsidised fees, free transportation and required school materials for marginalised and poor families at all school levels, with special attention to the excluded and most vulnerable Romani families and ensure that at least half of scholarships target Romani girls and young women.

Access to Employment

In Serbia, a large number of Romani women do not have access to a formal employment as a result of low educational attainment levels as well as direct and indirect discrimination on the part of employers.

The partners are aware of only 3 Romani women working in the public sphere in Serbia. All 3 of these women are employed in positions specifically related to Romani issues.

Many Romani women suffer from direct discrimination when seeking employment in both the public and the private sectors during the hiring process. During our research, cases were reported in which the grounds for not hiring the person were ethnically motivated. Employed Romani women also reported instances of discrimination at their workplaces on ethnic grounds such as job dismissals and expectation of working longer hours and under harsher conditions.

A large number of Romani women face severe employment security as they work in the grey economy and are, as such excluded from most social benefits.

We recommend that the Serbian government:

- Actively employ Romani women in the government administration.
- Condemn and punish responsible persons in cases of discrimination in access to employment. Victims of alleged discrimination should be encouraged to bring complaints with assurances that confidentiality will not be compromised on account of bringing a claim.
- Support positive measures, such as offering incentives (including tax exemptions, subsidised employment contracts, etc) to promote the hiring of Romani women.
- Make widely available free of charge vocational programmes for Romani women, and particularly elderly and illiterate Romani women, as well as women in similar situations from other minority groups, to improve work opportunities for these vulnerable groups.

Access to Health Care

Romani women's health situation is significantly worse than that of the general population as a result of inadequate living conditions – such as substandard housing, extreme poverty and the disadvantaged position of Romani women within their domestic setting. Romani women face barriers accessing health care services as a result of lack of identity documents, health insurance or health card. Romani women refugees, IDP's and returnees are particularly affected by lack of identity documents.

Romani women face inhuman and degrading treatment by doctors and other hospital staff on the basis of ethnicity which in some cases results in denial of health care treatment. Discrimination in the area of health care is particularly evident in the areas of reproductive and maternal health and emergency care as these are the most commonly used and in many cases the only health care services used by Romani women.

We therefore recommend that the Serbian government:

- Ensure that Romani women and other vulnerable groups are incorporated into the state welfare system, including full access to state-sponsored health insurance.
- Adopt health related strategies and policies which take a holistic approach (focusing also on education, employment, housing, traditions) to improve the health of Romani women.
- Design and implement effective health promotion programmes targeting Romani women and Romani communities. This should include measures which bring health professionals to Romani communities to improve their understanding of factors contributing to the health situation of Roma.
- Ensure that prohibitions against discrimination on the part of health care personnel and institutions, as part of the implementation of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, be enacted, monitored, and enforced and undertake local and national awareness-raising anti-discrimination campaigns.