Interplay between gender and ethnicity: Exposing Structural Disparities of Romani women

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Analysis of the UNDP/World Bank/EC regional Roma Survey data

This research paper attempts to address the issue of intersectional status of Romani women in four areas prioritized by the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015), namely education, employment, health and housing. In order to explore the primary intertwining features of gender and ethnicity the status of Romani women is compared both with non-Romani women and Romani men. The primary goal of this paper is to encourage policy makers to recognize the structural inequalities of gender and its interplay with ethnic dimensions. Related is the need to address gender inequality amongst Roma in an adequate and sustainable manner as well as to provide insight about the importance of addressing gender equality issues as a crucial aspect of Roma inclusion.

The empirical part of this research paper is based on data coming from two unique data collections, i.e. 2004 UNDP Regional Roma Survey and 2011 UNDP/EC/WB regional survey on Roma communities. Both the surveys contain recent gender and ethnic-disaggregated data, which serve as basis for intersectional analysis of gender and ethnic discrimination. The surveys allow for a comparative analysis between Roma, who live in areas of compact Roma, and non-Roma populations living in close proximity to the Roma. The starting point of the analysis is the discussion of the observable disparities reflected in the statistical data. Additionally, the paper analyzes the hidden gender inequalities together with their possible sources and explains their potential causes and social implications. Finally, by using both data collections changes in the relative status of Romani women over the time are also analyzed.

The findings from 2011 UNDP/WB/EC regional survey on Roma communities show that Romani women in comparison both to non-Romani women and Romani men are experiencing significantly lower level of educational achievements – both in terms of quantity as well as quality – lower employment prospects and worse health conditions. Family background of Roma individuals and other unobserved factors such as cultural customs and values are found to be the key drivers of Romani women disadvantage in terms of educational outcomes that has further negative impact on their labor market prospects. Moreover, Roma individuals are found to live in very poor housing conditions that have severe impact all of the spheres listed above. Their civic and political involvement is also limited by their education and social circumstances. The data reveal that some improvements in the position of Romani women over the years 2004-2011 took place. Still however it has to be recognized that in the time of an economic slowdown, many European societies are currently experiencing, they may be exposed to a higher risk of vulnerability and discrimination.

There is a strong argument that investing in women goes beyond personal gains and makes an intergenerational impact on their children as well as on their wider communities (e.g.

Summers, 1994; World Bank, 2001). Despite that there are no legal or policy regulations to tackle discrimination of women from disadvantaged groups, such as ethnic minorities, who face several types of discrimination based on ethnicity and gender. This should be therefore assessed and monitored by the EU and national agencies and institutions as there is tremendous need for gender-responsive policies that address intersectional discrimination, such as that experienced by Romani women.

In this framework, investing in Romani women will have long-lasting impact on the Roma community through the intergenerational transmission and consequently will make the efforts in regards Roma inclusion more effective for the benefit of the present as well as future generations. Empowering Romani women economically and politically will have a positive effect not only on their communities but also on European society as whole.