



**4<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Romani Women  
17-18 September 2013, Helsinki  
Final report**

**Introduction**

On the 17-18 September 2013, the Government of Finland organised in Helsinki the 4<sup>th</sup> International Romani Women's Conference in cooperation with the Council of Europe. More than one hundred Romani women from various European countries gathered to take stock of past initiatives and developments at policy and Roma community level and to contribute to a Strategy on ways to advance the status of Romani women in Europe.

The 4<sup>th</sup> International Romani Women's Conference in Finland is part of a series of similar initiatives facilitated and supported by the Council of Europe jointly with various national governments since 2003. Within these forums, Romani women had the opportunity to raise concerns, exchange experiences and mobilise jointly over common purposes. They have also expressed several times the need for sustainable ways of cooperating with each other and for acting as a network over various priority issues or threats. Thus, after the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Romani Women's Congress in Spain in 2011, Romani women have worked jointly with the Council of Europe and the Finnish Government in developing mechanisms for wider consultations with Romani women.

Thus, in 2012 the Finnish government, which had previously announced its intention and commitment to hold the 4<sup>th</sup> International Romani Women's Conference in Helsinki, organised together with the Romanian government (the National Roma Cultural Institute) and in cooperation with the Council of Europe a brainstorming meeting of Romani women's experts and activists in Bucharest, which prepared the groundwork for the international conference and defined ways for an inclusive consultation and involvement of Romani women in the outcome of the conference. This included the creation of online consultations via questionnaires for defining priority areas, open calls for participation in the conference and online streaming of the conference in Helsinki.

As a result of the Helsinki Conference, a strategic framework document, the *Strategy on the advancement of Romani women and girls in Europe, 2014-2020* was developed based on discussions and recommendations by Romani women at the Helsinki Conference. The Strategy aims to be a policy tool to be used by Romani women in their advocacy and policy development work with various partners; by national and local governments; by intergovernmental organisations and other relevant stakeholders.

In order to build on previous developments and increase visibility and joint action on Romani women's issues, an informal a platform initiative was launched during the last day of the

Helsinki Conference. Phenjalipe (“Sisterhood”), Romani Women’s Informal Platform aims to support the implementation of the strategic document formulated in the objectives of the conference and to further facilitate exchanges of information and coordination at regional level on issues related to Romani women and girls. The Strategy will be attached to this report.

### **Priority areas of the Helsinki Conference**

The conference hosted three parallel workshops focusing on: “Education as a precondition for the fulfilment of the rights of Romani women”; “Advancement of the rights and gender equality of Romani women in society and community mobilisation” and “Enhancement of active citizenship, participation and networking of Romani women”.

#### **I. Workshop on EDUCATION as a precondition for the fulfilment of the rights of Romani women**

The workshop on education addressed a number of obstacles in the access to education of Romani women and girls. It also discussed the importance of integrating more effectively elements of the Romani identity in the school curricula of various school subjects, while promoting an open and inclusive education system which allows for modern or even alternative forms of education, adapted on local educational needs of children, especially girls.

Thus, access to education of Romani girls is many times hindered both by internal or external obstacles. Poverty and social exclusion have been identified as real obstacles preventing many Romani girls from attending school. Poverty prevents Romani parents from sending their children to school, as they cannot afford all costs related to the education of their children. The impact of poverty has in many situations a disproportionate impact on Romani girls’ education, since they are more likely to miss out because of household responsibilities or cultural values and practices. Discrimination against Romani girls manifests itself in a complex way, as it extends from hindering access to Romani girls to any education, to harassment and bullying at school by non-Romani peers and school personnel, from poor school infrastructure and poor quality of education manifested through low level of literacy, low school performance and high dropout rates to more severe forms of discrimination such as segregation and misplacement of Romani girls in schools for mentally challenged.

Early marriage of Romani girls was indicated as an obstacle to pursuing higher education in traditional Romani communities. Early marriage is being tolerated and largely ignored by state authorities, despite the fact that girls and possibly boys are under the legal age on the account that “it’s in their tradition” and thus an illegal act is justified in the context of so called cultural heritage. The dropping out of married girls from school is viewed as a “natural” consequence, which goes usually unchallenged and unpunished.

Existing legal and policy tools at country level, including targeted actions on Romani education are not effective in counteracting social exclusion and systemic discrimination of Romani girls and boys in the area of education. Anti-discrimination laws provide remedies for individuals suffering from discrimination. But acts of discrimination such of school segregation is not the act of one teacher or even one school, it is moreover the result of a more systemic practice which cannot be solved by bringing to court a school or even the Ministries of Education.

Most participants at the Helsinki Conference raised concern over the fact that many institutions dealing with education are not employing a proper methodology in dealing with multi-ethnic groups. More so, the act of education is missing a perspective about who Roma are, about their contribution to society, their language and cultural values and traditions.

One of the conclusions of the workshop was that a real change in the area of education of Romani girls and women requires a long-term and multifaceted approach and commitment of educational institutions and other sectors of the government and society at various levels, including inside the Romani community but also through the revision and monitoring of their impact. Romani women have provided an important number of recommendations for local and national governments as well as for other stakeholders and actors in the area of education, as they follow:

- **Recommendations to national and local authorities**

Government authorities should:

- ✓ Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduce dropout rates in girls. Take appropriate measures to increase literacy among Romani girls, combat absenteeism and dropout among Romani girls and boys while reintegrating those who have already dropped out;
- ✓ Take urgent measures to end segregation in schools where Romani children learn, and to integrate them into inclusive quality schools and classes;
- ✓ Take measures to prevent and combat stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination experienced by Romani girls in schools and ensure that Romani children are educated in an inclusive educational environment, free of discrimination and harassment;
- ✓ Address the problem of Romani children left behind by migrant parents, by ensuring enrolment, attendance and academic performance, as well as the necessary psycho-social and reintegration assistance and other support to them as needed;
- ✓ Eliminate financial and administrative or other obstacles to the access of Romani girls to education and thus ensure the provision of adequate, appropriate and affordable education. Introduce quota systems for minority children as a way to ensure access of Romani girls to secondary and higher education;
- ✓ Identify Romani girls from marginalised communities and systematically support them in ensuring that they begin school at the same age as other children, and subsequently continue to the level that they choose;
- ✓ Employ and train Romani women teachers and teaching assistants or mediators to strengthen school integration of Romani children and contribute to increasing the number of Romani professionals;
- ✓ Develop and adopt “Life-long learning” programs for Romani parents and mothers in order to facilitate social inclusion of both parents and children; develop vocational education for Romani women adult on real needs;
- ✓ Revise training for teachers to include anti-discrimination, gender-sensitivity and intercultural training. In addition, pedagogical training should consider, where relevant, modern and or alternative tools such as visual aid training, community field training, regional teaching methods’ workshops, exchange programs etc.;
- ✓ Revise school curriculum to include elements of the Romani past and present history, culture and traditions for primary, secondary and higher education;

- ✓ Collect and disseminate best practices about inclusive, gender sensitive and intercultural “teacher training” approaches;
- ✓ Consider alternative education as a way to ensure access of all Romani girls, regardless of their circumstances, including but not limited to: television, mobile and distance learning;
- ✓ Implement positive measures in order to increase the number of Romani children attending and completing post-secondary and university education;
- ✓ Carry out actions aimed at increasing Romani parents’ awareness of the importance of nursery school, of preventing dropping-out, and of giving priority to their children’s education; engage in effective community action together with Romani parents to address existing gaps and challenges;
- ✓ More resources should be created to highlight relevant role models and include them in the education curriculum;
- ✓ Collect disaggregated data by gender and ethnicity with regards to Romani girls’ literacy and participation levels to ensure effective school participation and prevent drop-out rates, as well as to assess impact various challenges on Romani girls’ education as supposed to boys and non-Romani students;
- ✓ Make a greater commitment to mainstream gender and Romani women and girls’ educational priorities in the national and local integration strategies for Romani inclusion;
- ✓ Develop evaluation and monitoring systems about the way gender and Romani women’s issues are mainstreamed into the Romani, social inclusion and gender equality policies and measures;
- ✓ Make available and use structural funds for promoting and supporting Romani girls’ education;
- ✓ Improve cooperation with Romani communities; adopt a positive approach to change perceptions about Romani communities;
- ✓ Support Romani women to develop initiatives at local and regional level;
- ✓ Romani women and girls should be provided with human rights education as a means of empowering them to claim and defend their rights.

- **Recommendations to the European Union**

Education is a strong part of the overall EU development framework beyond 2015, with a specific emphasis on improving equity and quality. The EU has made a firm commitment to human development and social inclusion in the development budget and indicated a disburse of €2.5 billion in support of basic education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training in the 2014-2020 period. An additional €1.5 billion is expected to be allocated to support the EU Higher Education cooperation and mobility programme.

The European Union should:

- ✓ Ensure that by 2030 every child, including Romani girls completes at least basic education and has basic literacy and numeracy skills;
- ✓ Work with partner countries and development partners – and other actors such as the private sector and youth representatives – to ensure a coordinated approach for improving results in the education of Romani girls and aligning support with national education plans. This includes continuing to support the Global

Partnership for Education and working on international aid effectiveness strategies;

- ✓ Work to define segregation as illegal discrimination under EU and European law.

- **Recommendations to the Council of Europe**

- ✓ Work with governments to change stereotypes and negative prejudices against Romani girls in the act of education;
- ✓ Support activities which teach parents, teachers and students about the genocide of Roma;
- ✓ Train school personnel/teachers on anti-discrimination and inclusive education to prevent segregation, improve access of Romani girls to education, and support an inclusive school environment;
- ✓ Ensure that the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and in-house initiatives facilitate the development of local action plans on Roma integration that are gender sensitive and take account of the situation of Romani girls and the impact of poverty on their access and follow through in education;
- ✓ Ensure that CAHROM keeps on its agenda Roma women issues and organise regular thematic visits and reports on Roma education, with a particular focus on the situation of Romani girls.

## **II. Workshop on Enhancement of active citizenship, participation and networking of Romani women**

Participants in this workshop expressed an overall concern that Romani women are generally excluded from the social, economic and political life because of discrimination and their poor level of education or relevant training, gender stereotypes and traditional roles, lack of security of tenure, segregation in housing and education and lack of power resources. Their role as a caretaker and keeper of values and family heritage are often disregarded by their family members and society at large. Their level of political participation is extremely low, with minor representation at local level as councillors. In terms of mobilization, there have been attempts to organise under a network umbrella, but currently there is no operational network or activity, which is representing Romani women's interests at international level. There are instead Romani women's NGOs acting locally or nationally, which are not necessarily driven by a strategic vision but rather by institutional survival.

There are still many structural inequalities that limit Romani women's ability to attain equitable participation in society. The lack of self-esteem, the scarcity of role models, the lack of peer support and the gap between grassroots Romani women and those working on higher levels, all prevent them from taking up power engaging positions. There is therefore a need to work towards developing a more active and engaged citizenship, through dialogue, raising awareness of social issues, and encouraging participation by citizens in informing the development of social policies and practices; to create what bell hooks (2003) calls a 'teaching community', where people can genuinely participate, listen, and learn from one another.

The promotion of active citizenship behaviour can sustain processes of social cohesion and contribute to improve quality of life and social wellbeing. The practice of active citizenship is therefore a question of being empowered to handle the practice of democratic culture, and feeling that one has a stake in getting involved in the communities in which one lives, whether

by choice or force of circumstance. The concept of active citizenship ultimately speaks to the extent to which individuals and groups feel a sense of attachment to the societies and communities to which they theoretically belong, and is therefore closely related to the promotion of social inclusion and cohesion as well as to matters of identity and values.

In the case of Romani women, in order to understand the concept of active citizenship, one needs to assess not only how they participate as citizens, but also the ways in which concerns that impact primarily upon women have been systematically ignored or trivialized within discourses around citizenship.

The challenges expressed by Romani women at the Helsinki Conference lie at local level. Attempts of improving living conditions on the grassroots level of Roma will only succeed if Romani women are participating as full citizens in equal stakeholdership.

Some of the conclusions expressed in the workshop underlined the need for activities to focus on the training, support and mobilization of grassroots young women – both Roma and non-Roma. Young Romani women have the potential to explore different ways to challenge negative stereotypes and thus they should be supported to engage in an active dialog with local authorities and generate partnerships while supporting a more effective and gendered local governance. Therefore, it is important to support and enable confidence in young Romani women to play an active role. Continuous coaching and support of young Romani women can contribute to mobilizing and empowering communities, while supporting and ensuring sustainable development of both individuals and communities.

- **Recommendations to national and local authorities**

Government authorities should:

- ✓ Review, reform and correct any legislation, policy or practice that has a disproportionately negative impact on Romani women and girls and ensure that adequate mechanisms exist for preventing and combating discrimination, including on multiple grounds in Romani women's access to education, employment, health care, social protection, housing etc.;
- ✓ Mainstream Romani women's concerns into gender, Roma and social inclusion policies, programmes and actions, including through the creation of committees/working groups on Romani women's issues in local and national governments;
- ✓ Take concrete measures aimed at enabling Romani women and young girls to take an active part of decision-making processes and relevant policy developments at local, regional and national level and thus ensure their effective participation in the social, economic, cultural and political life;
- ✓ Develop plans and programmes to ensure the effective participation of Romani women in public and political life. These plans should include the adoption of positive measures such as quotas, the development of educational and training programmes to build capacity in Romani women and young girls, measures to ensure diversity and multiculturalism among public administration staff, and the allocation of sufficient resources to realise identified objectives. An annual national program for Romani women's political participations should also be considered;

- ✓ Establish a mechanism to monitor progress achieved in increasing Romani women's and young girl's participation and their equal and meaningful representation in public and political life at all levels;
- ✓ Address obstacles preventing the effective participation of Romani women in public and political life through revision or adoption of laws, policies and programme measures;
- ✓ Romani women who become community leaders should be supported and promoted to become positive role models in their community and society at large;
- ✓ Support adult education and life-long learning of Romani women to be able to take active part in society and become autonomous;
- ✓ Involve Romani men and leaders in programmes and workshops in order to achieve a change in traditional perceptions and practices and to eradicate discrimination against Romani women from within communities;
- ✓ Promote and support the empowerment of Romani women and girls, by supporting measures on their economic and human rights empowerment at large;
- ✓ Ensure that Romani women realise their economic rights by developing policies aiming to build their capacity and creating new employment opportunities for them as alternatives to traditional gendered occupations;
- ✓ Support measures, including training in diversity, business initiatives or quota systems to enhance their Romani women's full participation in society and ensure their equal participation;
- ✓ Facilitate Romani women, especially at local level and where relevant, to access to microcredits to enable small business initiatives, and design training programmes on how to use microcredits and run businesses effectively;
- ✓ In collaboration with Romani and women's rights organisations, seek to ensure fully the cultural rights of Romani women, including through the promotion and support of intercultural dialogue and inclusive education in school curricula and through institutional and inter-stakeholders cooperation at various levels;
- ✓ Support Romani women's NGOs and groups to engage with local and national authorities as policy development partners, representing the interests of Romani women, girls and Roma communities;
- ✓ Promote and support exchanges of best practices on good governance on gender/Romani women's mainstreaming in policy and practice (e.g. the Socrates programme of 1994 on adult education involving eight Member States<sup>1</sup>).

### **III. Workshop on the Advancement of the rights and gender equality of Romani women in society and community mobilization**

Participants at the Finnish Conference pointed to the extreme poverty and social exclusion experienced by Romani women and girls across European countries. Their experience is substantively different to that of Romani men and non-Romani women. They face the additional burden of racism as well as gender discrimination, which push Romani women at the margins of society. Low educational attainment and high rates of irregular attendance and school dropout, high unemployment rates and poor employment opportunities especially for Romani women in rural areas reap Romani women and girls of realistic possibilities for integration and full participation in their societies. Increased racism and anti-Gypsyism in the context of global economic crisis and international mobility of Romani families affect the safety of Romani women and girls and making them increasingly vulnerable to social exclusion, exploitation,

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<sup>1</sup> Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom.

trafficking and violence. Traditional family roles, many Romani women find themselves in, create additional mechanisms of exclusion. Early and child marriages are still recurrent in traditional Roma communities. While there is a positive ascending trend in the gender relations between Romani women and men, there is yet a long way to go for Romani women to become autonomous and feel that they can make choices outside pre-assumed ascribed gender roles.

Romani women often feel left out from consultation and decision-making processes on legislation, policies and programmes, including on those that are specifically designed to address their situation. Many Romani women working at the local level were concerned that their knowledge and expertise about the human rights concerns of their communities are overlooked both by local and national level politicians. Many are discouraged that even when communities are consulted, it is often through a male leader who is not necessarily sensitive and informed about the situation and particular experiences of Romani women.

Conference participants highlighted the importance of mainstreaming Romani women's concerns and priorities. Thus, the mainstreaming of gender and Romani women's concerns and priorities, both in policy and practice would enable public policy responses to advance equality and to combat discrimination. Gender mainstreaming introduces a culture of impact assessment, monitoring and review into the public policy process and thus enhances the effectiveness of Romani women specific policies; it also eliminates barriers for Romani women experiencing inequality, reduces poverty, boosts economic growth and strengthens citizenship. Mainstreaming creates means for the empowerment of Romani women and their autonomy.

Romani women have discussed at length about the need for increased community mobilization and capacity building of Romani women's NGOs and groups, as well as about networking and partnership with relevant actors. Romani women stressed the need to create and increase networks of Romani women, whereby they can act together to make Romani women's issues a priority for national and local governments, international organisations and human rights institutions and women's groups. They also discussed about the importance of providing expert opinions and substance to policy and programme development processes as well as to human rights monitoring bodies.

Participants addressed as well the need to include and take account of multiple identities, experiences and belonging of Romani women (such as Romani women Travellers, IDPs and Refugees, LGBT, Sinti, Ashkali, Egyptians, etc.) and to strengthen solidarity and cooperation among various Romani women's groups across Europe, thus closing existing gaps in engagement and participation by various women's groups in several countries.

Romani women participants in the Finnish conference concluded that supporting the establishment of a pan European Romani women's platform or network could help mobilise Romani women in various countries, build solidarity and partnership to address Romani women's inequalities, challenges and priorities at national and international level and increase visibility on Romani women's issues at country and international level.

- **Recommendations to national and local authorities**

Government authorities should:

- ✓ Mainstream gender and Romani women's concerns in all policy and programmes at national and local level. Allocate adequate resources to projects to address the priorities of Romani women. Where they have gender-sensitive or minority-



specific budgets, governments should ensure that these include and target Romani women;

- ✓ Identify and address obstacles preventing Romani women's participation in decision-making by a systematic and consistent approach;
- ✓ Promote and support the development or strengthening of local Romani women's associations, groups and networks that can mobilise and articulate their voice in appropriate forums as well as act as partners for the local and national authorities;
- ✓ Take measures to build the capacity of local Romani women groups and organisations. Support training, facilitation of networking opportunities, mobilization of grassroots women activists and youth;
- ✓ Promote and support Romani women's active participation in local authorities' activities, including in local politics (ex. by voter registration and by standing as candidates for elections);
- ✓ Public administration institutions at all levels (local, regional, and national) should be encouraged to employ Romani women in order to ensure diversity and affective participation in local and national governance;
- ✓ Invest in Romani women's economic, educational and political empowerment.
- ✓ Develop mechanisms that permit working with Romani parents to overcome the disadvantaged situation of Romani girls and boys in the field of education focusing particularly on the culturally determined barriers in the education of Romani girls in some Roma communities;
- ✓ Support catch up educational and long life learning programs for Romani women;
- ✓ Increase the number of Romani girls and women studying in universities and colleges through scholarship schemes and other positive action measures;
- ✓ Increase the number of Romani women health mediators, teaching assistants and social workers employed and ensure sustainability of their positions in all countries where such programs exist, without limiting their access to labour market to these positions;
- ✓ Create community-based and community-run programs to create work opportunities for Romani women;
- ✓ Create alternative forms for employment and self-employment for Romani women; promote Romani women entrepreneurship through the structural funds;
- ✓ Preparing programs fostering agriculture and farming activities as an occupation for rural Romani women.

- **Recommendations to intergovernmental organisations**

They should:

- ✓ Mainstream Romani women's issues throughout their gender equality mechanisms, objectives and activities;
- ✓ Support and develop approaches on gender mainstreaming/mainstreaming Romani women's issues in policy and programmes by addressing the inequalities, concerns and priorities of Romani women and girls;
- ✓ Support the capacity building and empowerment of Romani women activists and NGOs through training, workshops, exchange programmes and study visits, institutional and programme development support/grant schemes;
- ✓ Support projects at local level on Romani women's rights and empowerment;
- ✓ Support Romani women's engagement with ongoing local level initiatives on women, Roma and/or Romani women implemented particularly by local authorities;

- ✓ Support networking and cooperation of Romani women's associative movements at international level;
- ✓ Develop and promote best practices on mainstreaming Romani women into policy and practice and Romani women's empowerment;
- ✓ Support disaggregated data collection by gender and ethnicity to include Romani women and girls;
- ✓ Council of Europe should work with governments and media, to raise awareness on Roma culture and history to counter negative myths and stereotypes and bring together Roma and non-Roma communities.

- **Recommendations to Romani women's NGOs and networks**

They should:

- ✓ Develop and/or strengthen expertise on mainstreaming gender/Romani women's concerns and priorities into policy and action through developing gender/Romani women's indicators, mainstreaming approaches into sectorial policies etc.;
- ✓ Create sustainable partnerships for the mainstreaming of Romani women's issues in local and national level policies;
- ✓ Work to empower Romani women and communities at local level;
- ✓ Raise awareness of Romani women about their rights and obligations and support their capacities to/facilitate their access to public services and decision making process at local and/or national level;
- ✓ Support the creation of national and international networks and forums of Romani women and girls ensuring participation of Romani women and girls of various belongings and experiences.

**In the light of discussions in the three workshops, Romani women have highlighted concerns and proposed recommendations for related areas. Thus, this report contains also recommendations on related fields.**

## **EMPLOYMENT**

Romani women throughout the three workshops raised concerns about the restriction of Romani women's access to the labour market, prevailing discrimination and higher risk of unemployment. Romani women are often the first ones to lose their jobs in times of economic crisis and frequently find themselves confined to specific low-skill, low-status and low-paid sectors of employment and in the informal sector. Barriers to Romani women's access to labour markets include lack of education, lack of awareness of job opportunities, remoteness of the work location, lack of public infrastructure for child care, cultural traditions and gendered societal roles, gender- and minority-based discrimination in hiring, promotion and pay. Fear was expressed that in informal labour markets, Romani women are often excluded from basic labour protection and employed under not only poor but also insecure, difficult, harmful or even dangerous working conditions.

- **Recommendations to national and local authorities**

They should:

- ✓ Allocate resources to expand the employment opportunities available to Romani women, including through education, literacy, vocational training (including skills to run small businesses), credit and market access so that they can realise their

economic rights, and both seek and create new forms of employment within and beyond their communities;

- ✓ Ensure that Romani women realise their economic rights by developing policies geared to build their capacity and creating new employment opportunities for them as alternatives to traditional gendered occupations;
- ✓ Create community-based and community-run programs to create work opportunities for Romani women;
- ✓ Create alternative forms for employment and self-employment for Romani women; promote Romani women entrepreneurship through the structural funds;
- ✓ Promote and support the use of Roma crafts, particularly those practised by women, as a basis for small business development;
- ✓ Preparing programs fostering agriculture and farming activities as an occupation for rural Romani women;
- ✓ Public administration institutions at all levels (local, regional, and national) should be encouraged to employ Romani women.

## **HEALTH CARE**

Romani women raise concerns about obstacles for Romani women to access health care. They often receive improper or low-quality of healthcare or live in places where no health services are available. The activities of health-care providers, including hospitals, should prevent discriminatory practices against Romani women such as the refusal of treatment, isolation in separate wards or medical interventions without Romani women's consent, such as forced sterilisation.

- **Recommendations to national and local authorities**

They should:

- ✓ Evaluate and, where needed, improve Romani women's access to information about service provision, social and child services and health care;
- ✓ Ensure that health services are suitable as far as possible and accessible to mobile households. Consideration must be given to already existing positive practices, such as employing female Romani medical staff and health mediators to work closely with Romani communities who can help build bridges between Romani women and health and social service providers;
- ✓ Consider implementing trust-building activities for health care providers and for Romani women;
- ✓ Ensure that Romani families, especially in segregated settlements and travelling/migrant communities, have access to local health services, including provision of outreach and mobile facilities and of interpreting services where necessary;
- ✓ Ensure that health services reach Romani women and children and include preventive care, especially immunisation for young children, and that health information is readily available.

## **HOUSING AND ACCOMMODATION**

In the context of increasing number of evictions, forced returns of Roma to home countries and lack of facilities for Traveller communities, many housing and accommodation concerns were raised throughout the Helsinki conference. Romani women experience poverty, prejudice,

marginalisation and gender-based restrictions to a greater extent than Romani men that can frequently result in increased challenges relating to the right to adequate housing. In poor Romani neighbourhoods, there is often a lack of indoor kitchen, toilet, shower/bath or electricity, which poses serious challenges to Romani women and children, including in their health status.

- **Recommendations to national and local authorities**

They should:

- ✓ Map and assess the housing and accommodation related challenges faced especially by Romani women and children, including their possibilities to access water, food, health care and education;
- ✓ Develop strategies to end Roma residential segregation, to replace or improve the quality of existing housing, or to provide access to housing with all basic amenities (fresh water, drainage, gas, electricity, garbage collection, and paved roads) so as to facilitate social inclusion;
- ✓ Ensure access to adequate accommodation on suitable sites for travelling/migrant families with basic amenities and effective site management, ensuring consultation with settled residents in the area to address any concerns and promote social cohesion;
- ✓ Regularise the tenure of Roma in their homes or on sites, avoid forced evictions, and provide alternative accommodation of minimum housing standards in cases where forced evictions are unavoidable;
- ✓ Identify land where temporary accommodation of Roma can be installed while respecting environmental and sanitary regulations.

## **GENDER VIOLENCE & TRAFFICKING**

Domestic violence against Romani women and girls is rarely discussed and disclosed due to the fear that it might bring a further stigma to Roma in general. Equally, Romani women are particularly vulnerable to trafficking in persons, particularly those living in situations of poverty or conflict, or in remote and border regions. Many are trapped by false promises of a better future abroad and find themselves in hopeless situations far away from their homes and their already established networks of support. Disadvantaged Romani women and girls may also be particularly vulnerable to other contemporary forms of slavery, including forced labour, debt bondage, child labour, sale of children, forced prostitution and forced and early marriage.

- **Recommendations to national and local authorities**

They should:

- ✓ Put in place systematic measures to identify practices of violence and take robust action to eradicate violations;
- ✓ Strengthen bilateral, regional and international cooperation aimed at the elimination of trafficking in persons, targeting Romani women and children;
- ✓ Regional institutions should be established with concrete plans of action to combat and prevent all forms of violence/trafficking in persons and, which should include explicit attention to Romani women and girls;
- ✓ Develop and implement counselling and support programmes, which are culturally sensitive and accessible to Romani women;

- ✓ Practices that lead to and/or perpetuate gender inequality or/and violate the rights of Romani women and girls, including child marriage, should be tackled, through involving the Romani communities concerned and with the effective participation of Romani women;
- ✓ Government and law enforcement officials, social workers, health professionals and other relevant actors should receive training on gender equality and non-discrimination, violence against women, including domestic violence, and on the particular situation of Romani women and girls.

## **MEDIA AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH**

Private and public media actors often perpetuate existing misconceptions and stereotypes about Romani women, portraying them ignorant, only capable to act as housewives or shown as sexual objects. Romani women expressed concern over the increasing phenomenon of hate speech and anti-Gypsyism, through which public actors incite to violence, hatred or discrimination, and express public insults and defamation or threats against Roma. Hate speech often leads to hate crimes with irreversible harm and suffering onto Romani individuals, especially on Romani women and girls.

- **Recommendations:**

- ✓ Exercising the right of freedom of expression should be restricted according to international legal standards in order to combat racism to protect the human dignity of Romani women and men;
- ✓ Governments should ensure that there is legislation and guidelines for the media with regard to non-discrimination and the appropriateness of references and language and they are effectively enforces;
- ✓ Media reports should be monitored by independent oversight bodies to ensure compliance with standards, and penalties should be imposed for breach of standards;
- ✓ Media should evaluate and increase the representation of Romani women in their staff and in all categories;
- ✓ Efforts should be made to ensure positive representation of Romani women in broadcast programming. This includes programme content that portrays Romani women positively and raises awareness of the diversity of Romani women's perspectives and personal experiences.

## **THE NEED FOR DISAGGREGATED DATA**

While there are encouraging efforts at European policy level on emphasizing the needs and concerns of Romani women<sup>2</sup>, Romani women pointed out that advocacy and policy efforts on Romani women and girls are hindered in the absence of reliable data on their socio-economic situation. There is a dire need for accurate data disaggregated by ethnicity, gender and age to allow for a greater understanding of the issues affecting Romani women and girls and enable

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<sup>2</sup>The 2011 EU Council Conclusions on the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies underline that "Special attention should be paid to the interests and difficulties of Romani women and girls, who face the risk of multiple discrimination, and thus a gender perspective needs to be applied in all policies and actions for advancing Roma inclusion..."

targeted interventions. This might require explicit recognition by certain governments of the existence of Roma as an ethnic group on their territory. The reason for data collection, the process and the way that the information collected will be used should be fully transparent. Using equal opportunity and non-discrimination indicators is essential to develop, monitor and regularly review effective and targeted programmes to improve the situation of Romani women and tackle discrimination against them.

- **Recommendations to national and local authorities**

They should:

- ✓ In order to have appropriate planning, designing, implementation and monitoring of specific integration and inclusion policies and programmes for Roma, especially Romani women and girls, governments should undertake data-gathering exercises that are designed and implemented in consultation with Romani women;
- ✓ Disaggregated data collection should serve to assess the prevailing situation; assess the resources that are available and to examine actual access to and use of such resources; and conduct outcomes and impact assessments;
- ✓ Data collection should be conducted in an ethnically sensitive manner and on a voluntary basis, with full respect for the privacy and anonymity of the individuals concerned, in accordance with international standards of personal data protection. The creation of national status reports or white papers on the status of Romani women and girls should be also considered.

### **Follow-up to the Helsinki Conference**

The Turkish Romani woman participant at the Helsinki Conference expressed the wish that the Turkish government could host the 5<sup>th</sup> International Romani Women's Conference. As the result, the Council of Europe is organizing, together with the newly created Phenjalipe informal network of Romani women, a brainstorming meeting on 19 March 2014 with the Turkish authorities with the view to discussing the possibility for Turkey to host the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Romani women in Istanbul in 2015.

By the time of approval of this report by the conference participants and Phenjalipe members (March 2013), a number of additional follow-up activities have taken place, some of them have been facilitated by the Council of Europe with the financial support of the Finnish Government.

On 4 October 2013, Phenjalipe attended its first public event at the ROMACT and ROMED2 launching event in Hungary, attended by 100 national and international stakeholders.

On 8 November 2013, Phenjalipe organised a side event on "Mainstreaming Romani women's priorities" at the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting of the OSCE-ODIHR on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the OSCE Action Plan on Roma and Sinti.

On 26-27 November 2013, the Council of European under its ROMED2 programme with the European Union organised in Lisbon together with a group of Romani women the first Romani women's encounter in Portugal.

On 17 February 2014 an expert meeting of Romani women was held in the Council of Europe to further revise the outcome document of the Helsinki Conference, the Strategy of the Advancement of Romani Women and Girls 2014-2010 and to develop a bi-annual Action Plan

(2014-2016) for the realisation of the strategy objectives. As a result a Working Group of Romani Women was established for the implementation of the Strategy. This meeting was followed by a meeting on “Mainstreaming gender in Council of Europe/European Union programmes ROMACT and ROMED2” on 18 February 2014.

On 24 February 2014, the Council of Europe organised jointly with the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner in the Republic of Moldova, the UN WOMEN, the OSCE Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues and the Moldovan Roma NGO Tarnă Rom, a Roundtable on “Romani women’s political participation at national and local level” in Chişinău. The Lithuanian CAHROM member attended this meeting as an observer.

Lithuania has indeed proposed to set-up a CAHROM thematic group on Romani women’s empowerment and gender dimension of Roma inclusion policies and to be the requesting country for a CAHROM thematic visit of experts in Vilnius on 4-6 June 2014. Finland and Spain might be among the partner countries of this thematic group.

On the occasion of the International Women’s Day (12 March 2014), Phenjalipe, the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF) and the Council of Europe under its Dosta! campaign, will be holding a meeting on the status of Romani women in Strasbourg. The aims of the meeting are to raise awareness on the ongoing obstacles and challenges of Romani women in their daily lives, take stock of positive developments at policy and community level and to encourage Council of Europe action for the advancement of the status of Romani women and girls. The meeting will discuss the situation of Romani women in Council of Europe member states and will address specific issues such as the overrepresentation of Romani women and girls among victims of trafficking, early marriages, representation of Romani women in elected bodies and public administration as well as the role of Romani women as transformers of their life and the lives of their families.

The conclusions of the Helsinki conference, the *Strategy on the advancement of Romani women and girls in Europe 2014-2020* and the bi-annual Action Plan for the implementation of this Strategy in 2014-2016 will be presented and discussed at the 7<sup>th</sup> CAHROM meeting to be held in Strasbourg on 14-16 May 2014.