

Sixth International Conference of Roma Women

**“Women and Political Representation:
The Case of Roma and Traveller Women”**

Strasbourg, 6 November 2017

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- Thank the organisers for invitation.
- Women constitute half of the population and half of the voters, but they represent on average only a quarter of elected representatives. In addition, politics lacks diversity in terms of age, ability, ethnicity, social origin and other elements that constitute our multiple identities – including for Roma and Traveller Women.
- The issue of unbalanced representation of citizens is a democratic issue linked to equality, social justice, transparency, the enjoyment of human rights, and quality of life for all. Democracy is undermined by the existing unbalanced representation in political decision-making. **More women and diverse women** in politics means a better reflection of our diverse society and its concerns. It also leads to redefined political priorities and a more inclusive agenda for the benefit of ALL society.
- The multiple forms of discrimination and sexism women face in all aspects of life contribute to their exclusion in the public/political space – and Roma and Traveller women are not an exception. On the contrary, discrimination and sexism are deeply rooted in gender roles and stereotypes and a patriarchal culture which continues to consider the public domain as a predominantly male space.
- In addition to economic, social and cultural barriers, obstacles in electoral systems and political institutions, including political parties, severely hamper women’s participation in public and political life.

Some of the barriers preventing women from a higher participation in political decision-making, and which also affect Roma women, are:

- ✓ Deeply rooted mentalities and practices perpetuating traditional unequal power relations, including sex-segregated areas in politics (women in social issues and men in the more politically and economically relevant portfolios)
- ✓ Sexist and discriminatory practices and behaviours (e.g. in the selection of political parties’ candidates and leaders; sexist hate speech; sexual harassment);
- ✓ Lack of support and access to male-dominated political circles, networks and funds;
- ✓ Lack of role models/mentors for women and girls to enter the political arena;
- ✓ Problems to achieve a work/life balance (e.g. unequal share of responsibilities for women and men outside the workplace, and politicians’ work schedule);
- ✓ Lack of support for positive actions such as quota and parity systems.

- Targets and benchmarks for women’s political empowerment have been on the global agenda for many years (**Beijing Platform for Action**, 1995: part G on *women in power and decision-making*; **30% target**; Agenda 2030: **SDG 5.5** *Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life*).
- The Council of Europe has lead efforts to close the democratic gap and increase women’s participation in political life. In 2003, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted [Recommendation Rec\(2003\)3](#) on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making. The Recommendation indicates that, “**the representation of either women or men in any decision-making body in political or public life should not fall below 40%**”. This percentage should be understood as a minimum target and not the ultimate goal.
- The Recommendation also calls on Council of Europe member states to put in place supportive measures to “**encourage greater involvement of ethnic and cultural minorities, and especially women from these minorities, in decision making at all levels**”. Clearly a lot more needs to be done in this field.
- Council of Europe member states regularly report and provide data on the number of women and men in the main political decision making bodies in order to assess the implementation of the Recommendation. The third and latest to date of such assessments, based on 2016 data provided by 46 CoE member states, was launched last month. Let me share with you some of the findings which **highlight the deficit as regards women’s participation in the democratic processes of our societies**.

Legislative power

- The average percentage of women’s representation in national lower/single house was **25,6% in 2016**. This number is not far from the world’s average of **23,6%**, published by the [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#). The report presents an interesting finding concerning gender quota laws: when they are strong and well-designed (i.e. with high quota percentage, rules on rank order of women and men, and strict sanctions for non-compliance), quota rules or parity systems prove efficient. On the contrary, when quota measures are weak and rather symbolic, they are ineffective. The most successful countries in terms of balanced representation of women and men in political decision-making are those with political party quotas (with **28,8%** of women, compared to **23,1%** in countries without quotas or parity system). This demonstrates that the support and engagement of political parties is critical to effectively improve women’s representation.

Executive power

- Overall, positions at the very top of the political hierarchy at the executive level were still almost exclusively male dominated in 2016. For all of the executive functions considered in the report, **less than 11% of the respondent countries met the 40% minimum target**. Women made up **9,5%** of Heads of State elected by the citizens, **14,3%** of the Heads of State appointed by parliament, and

12,2% of the Heads of Government (when the Head of State was not also the Head of Government). The average percentage of women senior and junior ministers was **22,4%**.

- At the local level, the percentage of women mayors was extremely low (**13,4% in 2016**) and **none of the countries reached the minimum target of 40%**. Women constituted on average **26%** of municipal councillors.

Judicial power

- The percentages of women within the judiciary remained below the 40% minimum target, with **33% in High/Supreme courts, 28% in High Councils of the Judiciary and 26% in Constitutional Courts**.

Diplomatic service

- The lowest grade analysed – **minister counsellors** – counted on average the highest percentage of women (**30,5%**) while the highest grade – **ambassadors extraordinary and plenipotentiary** – counted the lowest average (**13%**). This shows a strong glass ceiling in the diplomatic service of Council of Europe member states. For all four categories considered (ambassadors extraordinary and plenipotentiary; envoys and ministers plenipotentiary; general consuls; minister counsellors), **the most populated group of countries was the one scoring a presence of women below 20%**.

Council of Europe institutions

- Within the Council of Europe bodies, the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities had on **average 43% and 44,8%** of women, respectively. The average percentage of women in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, remained slightly below the 40% threshold (**35,7%**). **Almost half of the countries reached the 40% minimum target in 2016 in the composition of their national delegations to the CoE's Parliamentary Assembly**.
- European Court of Human Rights: in 2016, there were **34,8%** women judges. While the presidency of the Court remains male, **parity was reached and even exceeded in 2016 for vice-presidents, section presidents and section vice-presidents**.

Next steps: What can we do now?

- Our recent report and this Conference continue to remind us of the progress that remains to be made to achieve women's full political empowerment and a balanced participation of women and men in politics. The obstacles on the way, as well as solutions and good practices to overcome them, are well known and require the involvement and engagement of political parties, authorities and the women's movement (including Roma and Traveller women) in supporting women's political empowerment and the inclusion of gender equality in politics.

Governments, political parties, civil society and academics should consider the following actions:

- Take a strong commitment to gender equality and balanced participation in political and public decision-making, leading to appropriate measures in legislation, policies and practice;
- Set strong quota laws or parity systems (with high quota percentage, rank order rules, strict sanctions);
- Consider switching to proportional electoral systems;
- Train leaders and executives of political parties, as well as the bodies responsible for choosing the candidates for elections, so they can reflect on their party's structure and address gender biases in the functioning, recruitment and selection practices in order to become inclusive, including by adopting strong political party quotas.
- Raise awareness among the media and the general public about the importance of having balanced participation in political and public decision-making, and the obstacles faced by women so that positive actions are supported as long as necessary;
- Support women candidates before and after their election;
- Engage with girls so that they consider political careers, including through role models and networking.

Balanced participation of women and men in decision-making remains high in the political agenda of the Council of Europe and its work to promote gender equality. Under the next Gender Equality Strategy for 2018-2023 (under discussion) the Gender Equality Commission will continue to support measures and good practices that promote gender equality in relation to: electoral systems, training of decision makers, gender-sensitive functioning of decision-making bodies, parity thresholds, effective quota laws and voluntary party quotas, and the regulation of political parties including public funding.

Partnerships and co-ordination between and with governments, civil society, international organisations, media, political parties, practitioners and researchers are critical to the success of our efforts to tackle the democratic deficit resulting from the unbalanced representation of women in the political decision-making processes.

The **future Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy for 2018-2023** recognises the important challenge of ensuring that all women benefit from gender equality policies and the protection provided by relevant standards, including disadvantaged groups of women (Roma and Traveller women, among others). The Strategy will be implemented in a co-ordinated way with other Council of Europe strategies and action plans, including the Thematic Action Plan on the Inclusion of Roma and Travellers, and in co-operation with relevant CoE bodies, including the Ad Hoc Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues.

The **Gender Equality Commission** looks forward to enhancing our partnership and co-operation in the implementation of the next Gender Equality Strategy across its different thematic priorities, including the one on which we are focusing here today: ensuring a balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making.