

Human Dimension Implementing Meeting

Warsaw, 26 September 2019

Manjola Veizi

Roma Woman Right Centre

Distinguished government and civil society representatives,

Distinguished participants,

On behalf of Albanian Roma women, I want to thank OSCE/ODHIR for all efforts done so far to enhance the participation of Roma and Sinti, particularly women and youth, in public and political life, and HDIM organizers for creating space through this working session to talk over progress done, challenges faced, and ways forward! Thank you for inviting me here!

I am Manjola Veizi, from Roma Women Rights Centre in Albania. Being engaged last years in small initiatives aimed to increase the participation of Roma and Egyptian women and youth in the public and political life, I am happy to share my insights over this topic.

Over last years, Albanian government commitment to respect Roma and Egyptian rights and address their vulnerable situation has been developed considerably. Development of the National and Local Roma Integration Plans, adoption of legal provisions to fight discrimination, appointment of Roma focal points in some state institutions, recognition of Roma and Egyptians as National Minorities in 2017, and partnering with International organizations in local and national projects aiming Roma integration, shows willingness to develop a sustainable and long-lasting approach. However, participation of Roma in public and political life remain still a concerning issue. Efforts done, mainly under international organizations projects, remain insufficient.

Regardless its main purpose, the integration of Roma and Egyptians, the National Roma Integration Plan's strategic goals are limited only in increasing access to basic services such as: Education, Health, Housing, Civil Registration, and Justice system, and do not include participation of Roma in public and political life. Thus, even achieving what is aimed in this plan is still concerning as because many of activities not backed up with adequate budget, lack of integrated approach and coordination, lack of proper evaluation and monitoring, and in some cases, lack of political will. The recent adopted law on the Protections of Minorities also does not foresee measures to enforce political participation. It enabled the creation of Minorities' committee, a structure under dependency of Prime minister office, to protect the rights and interests of minorities and facilitate the dialogue with government. Nor are there existing other legal provisions ensuring quotas/reserved seats for minorities in the Albanian assembly or municipality councils as it is the case in some other countries.

Roma individuals, particularly Roma women, continue nowadays to face multiple forms of discrimination due to their gender, ethnicity, economic and other related reasons such as lack of education, lack of civil registry documentation, etc.. This affects their subsequent social exclusion and non-access to basic services, and consequently their ability to participate actively in social and political life. They are low exposed in civic or voter education and their understanding of these concepts lag behind from majority's

population. Being in conditions they find difficulties to access basic services, realizing they become visible to most of politicians only on elections time, their interests are most the time absent from the political parties, promises done from politicians to them are not fulfilled, threatening/oppression by party supporters are present almost always in elections time, made Roma not only lose trust to politicians but also interest to involve in election process at all. During recent years there have been few cases Roma individuals living in areas with high Roma concentration got invited to be part of political parties and included in their list of candidates, but unfortunately it resulted they mostly aimed use of them to generate votes rather than real will to offer to them a real opportunity to be part of political subject, as the placement of them in candidate list was not giving them any chance to win. Some other saw as a best option to be part of politics by running as independent candidate, but lack of knowledge about procedure they have to follow, difficulties to provide all documentation in time, and lack of financial resources made even this option not affordable for them.

Starting from 2013 with “Best Practices of Roma Integration” and following in the coming elections of 2015, 2017, 2019, OSCE/ODHIR has been supporting short term projects to increase civic and political participation of Roma women and youth. Regardless the short time and limited activities of these projects, first in their kind, had a very good impact. Increasing awareness on the importance of vote, how democracy processes function, and demonstrating through a simplified methodology how the voting process is functioning resulted in not increasing their understanding but also their hope they can make a change through their vote. There was observed increase of number of women voting after training and also interest from other members of community to receive such kind of trainings. Such great outcome confirmed the huge need of voter and civic education training among Roma population.

Considering the above situation, I would recommend the following measures:

- Include Participation of Roma in public and political life as a strategic goal in the post 2020 national action plan for Roma Integration;
- Ensure by legal provisions and other relevant policies quota/ reserved seats for minority members are established political parties;
- Provide information and long term supporting of Roma, particularly women and youth to take part actively in the designing, implementing, and monitoring of local/national development plans. Adopt special measures to promote their participation in the civil service;
- Establish mechanisms to ensure equal, direct and open communication between Roma and Sinti representatives and government authorities, including advisory and consultative bodies;
- Organize informative outreach activities or voter/civic education trainings. Ensure that Roma voters can make free and informed choices in elections;
- Address properly and in advance the illiteracy and lacking of documents issues of Roma and Egyptians and make sure they exercise their right and obligation of voting;
- Election administration staff engaged in communication /training of communities should be trained as well on specific needs of Roma and Egyptian Communities and effective ways how to approach them;
- Informative elections materials be prepared in Romani language and be distributed to community time ahead elections (Last two election periods, 2017, 2019, regardless it was planned, they fail to prepare and distribute them before elections)

- Spot information given by TV or other means before/during election period should be prepared in a friendly manner, targeting Roma and Egyptian, and in Roma language when relevant;
- The issue of oppressing /threatening happening often in R/E communities during election period should be addressed adequately by responsible bodies;
- OSCE/ODHIR departments make sure to involve Roma in all its activities and do not rely only in Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Initiative Office activities;
- Support Roma, particularly young women and youth who aspire or have potential to be in politics through suitable mentoring programs;
- OSCE/ODHIR and domain organizations involved in observation engage more observers in Roma and communities. Roma and Egyptian individuals should be encouraged and supported to engage as observers during elections;