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A new handbook to include Roma women: “Nothing about us, without us”

“The purpose of the handbook is to find the needs of Roma women when addressing violence against women and domestic violence, for EEA and Norway Grant programme developers and funders,” says Rachel Eapen Paul, one of the authors of the handbook.

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The aim of the handbook is to ensure that Roma women are not only included as a target group and their needs adequately addressed, but that they are also guaranteed active participation in all phases of projects. (Illustration photo: iStockphoto)

"The reason this handbook is necessary is because of the huge gap in identifying the real needs of women in the Roma community," says the criminologist and former member of Grevio, Eapen Paul.

Together with the international minority rights expert Zora Popova, she has identified and examined the challenges Roma women face accessing justice.

The results will be published in a handbook that will be launched at the ECDV- conference in Iceland on 13 September (see fact box).

"The handbook should be used as a guide by all professionals who encounter cases of violence against Roma women in their work," Senada Sali, Legal Director at the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), writes in an email.

Sali, a Roma woman herself, has been one of the representatives on the steering committee that is in place to ensure that Roma women's needs are adequately addressed in the handbook.

"It should help to improve understanding of the difficulties faced by Roma women who are victims of violence, and also provide better services to victims," Sali explains.

> The major challenge is the prevalence of a top-down approach when programmes and projects are conceived and developed.

The problematic concept of inclusion

During the project, the experts had the opportunity to see the situation in Bulgaria from the perspective of people working in Roma NGOs, national institutions, and other Bulgarian and international private and public bodies.



Rachel Eapen Paul, one of the authors of the handbook, hopes the project and information about Roma women's access to justice can be used to scrutinise and assess the existing structures in place to tackle violence. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)

"For me, this process has confirmed even more starkly the extent to which this community has been neglected over so many years," says Eapen Paul.

She is referring to the multi-dimensional discrimination and intersectional inequalities that Roma women currently still face.

“The Roma community, and especially Roma women, are barely visible when it comes to policy making and the implementation of measures,” Eapen Paul explains.

"There is a lot of work being done, especially in Europe, but the voices of the Roma community and Roma women are not there to be heard," says Eapen Paul.

Read also: "We need to listen to the voice of Roma women"

"The handbook is one method of finding ways to include the Roma community and their needs – especially the needs of Roma women," she adds.

However, Eapen Paul believes that the concept of inclusion may be problematic, as it suggests that we already have something in place, and that we want to include a certain group in that structure.

"That is problematic because different minorities and the Roma community should already be present when we develop policies or build structures," says Eapen Paul.

“Nothing about us, without us”

"The handbook is guided by the principle ‘nothing about us, without us,’ and outlines how Roma women can actively be involved at the different stages of programmes and projects," explains Popova, who is one of the authors of the handbook.



"There is a general lack of comprehensive and coordinated policies, systems and measures. For that reason, the mechanisms already in place need to be redesigned," explains Zora Popova, one of the authors of the handbook. (Photo: Private)

Popova believes the major challenge is the prevalence of a top-down approach when programmes and projects are conceived and developed, implemented and evaluated.

"Prevailing prejudices and stereotypes, such as there not being sufficiently educated Roma women or that it is difficult to engage them, pose a significant barrier to their involvement in the project," Popova explains and adds:

"The main challenge is public officials' and international actors' lack of awareness about the fact that working together with stakeholders is the best way to transfer ownership of processes, to empower and to ensure the results are sustainable," Popova explains.

When it comes to the main challenge of preventing domestic and gender-based violence, Popova points out that this issue extends beyond Roma communities.

"There is a general lack of comprehensive and coordinated policies, systems and measures. For that reason, the mechanisms already in place need to be redesigned."

"This would benefit all women, victims, and those at risk of domestic and gender-based violence," Popova writes.

"Marginalisation increases vulnerability to violence"

Since they are a minority, the Roma community faces even more challenges and is marginalised in most European countries.

"Marginalisation increases vulnerability and susceptibility to violence," says Eapen Paul. She has been working with the issues of violence against women and gender equality for 40 years.

"In all the years I've been working with violence against women, I've found that isolation is one of the major factors contributing to sustained violence. Living in a marginalised community increases women's vulnerability to violence," Eapen Paul says.

> "There is a sense that talking about the violence betrays your whole community.

Like Popova, Eapen Paul highlights the need for coordinated systems.

"In order to address protection and provide good solutions, different entities need to work together. We need shelters and safe spaces," she says.

Counselling centres needed

For nearly five decades, designated shelters have existed throughout Europe where women can seek refuge, often with the assistance of the police, social services, or on their own accord.

However, Eapen Paul points out that, within the Roma community, not all women are willing to relocate to a shelter.

"They may be served better by some kind of outreach programme that could reach out to them, or by a local centre where they can access help," she says.

"This could be a counselling centre or an open forum that women can visit, not necessary because of violence, but an open forum where they can talk," she says, and compares this to how the first shelters in Europe were established:

"Women got together and talked about different issues that concerned them, and every time they met, somebody brought up violence," she says.

Eapen Paul believes that women in the Roma community need a similar open forum.

"They need their own fora where they can discuss issues and raise questions that are important to them. That would allow them to express the needs of their communities, rather than having their supposed needs imposed on them from the outside," she says.

Read more about female support groups in Slovakia: Gender equality for Roma communities

Cases rarely get prosecuted

According to Eapen Paul, there are two specific challenges when it comes to protection and support for Roma women.

"The first challenge is that social services are not always familiar with the multiple discrimination that Roma women experience, from both within the Roma community and the rest of society," she says.

"The second challenge is that talking about violence in minority communities often increases stigmatising. There is a sense that talking about the violence betrays your whole community."

See: Violence in Sámi communities: From too frightened to touch, to openness

She explains that the issues relating to protection, participation and prevention mentioned above ultimately create huge challenges at the prosecution phase.

"Cases of domestic and gender-based violence very rarely get to the prosecution phase because of the discrimination and challenges mentioned above. This is not only a challenge to minority communities but also in mainstream society."

"Very few cases reach court and, of those that do, only a very small percentage of cases result in convictions.”

"So what can be done and what measures will the handbook provide?"

"The courts, like other bodies, need training in multiple discrimination, stereotypes, cultural sensitivity and violence against women in general," says Eapen Paul, and adds:

"Not all cases need to be resolved by handing down punitive sentences to perpetrators. The Istanbul Convention emphasises the use of dissuasive sanctions, providing alternative ways to hold perpetrators accountable.”

“Alternative approaches, such as community service or culturally relevant methods of sanctioning, can be explored. It is, however, crucial to address the danger of allowing perpetrators to go unpunished, as it perpetuates the cycle of violence," Eapen Paul explains.

Three issues to ensure justice

The ERRC's legal director, Senada Sali, has been a member of the steering committee that was established as an advisory body to develop, implement and follow-up the bilateral project between Bulgaria and Norway. One of the outcomes of this project is the handbook (see fact box).



"One practical outcome (of the handbook) could be that professionals are more sensitive to cases of violence against Roma women and are therefore able to carry out their work more effectively," Senada Sali, Legal Director at the European Roma Rights Centre, explains. (Photo: ERRC)

Like Eapen Paul, she believes that efforts need to be intensified towards the legal system and support should be provided to Roma women who are victims of violence. She highlights three issues that she believes are the most important to ensure that Roma women can access justice to assert their rights to be free from violence:

"Firstly, Roma organisations need to be trained and funded to provide high quality legal support to Roma women before courts and prosecutions, or the state system of legal aid needs to be functional and accessible to Roma women," Sali writes.

“Secondly, special protection measures need to be adopted to ensure that Roma women and their children have the necessary support to carry on with their lives once they report abuse. The measures should ensure their safety, financial stability and accommodation,” Sali explains.

"Thirdly, stronger sanctions need to be introduced for mishandling cases of violence against Roma women by social workers, the police and prosecutors, on the grounds of institutional antigypsyism, stereotypes and bias," she writes.

Sali also suggest that the handbook should have a specific section on how to treat Roma children who have been victims of violence, in order to ensure that authorities do not place them into state care as an expedient solution.

"The first and best option is that Roma children stay with their mothers and family, and authorities should allocate resources towards their wellbeing," Sali explain.

The SYNERGY handbook is in its final stage of production and will be launched during a workshop at the ECDV-conference on 13 September.

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