Political participation and representation of Roma women in Moldova

CEDAW SHADOW REPORT

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1. **Introduction**

This submission is made by the Roma National Center, a leading non-governmental organization that works for the protection of Roma rights in the Republic of Moldova. The organization was established in 2001. The entity aims at enhancing social inclusion of Roma people through provision of legal assistance, facilitation of access to social services and education, and advocacy.

This shadow report has a focus on CEDAW Article 7 – participation of women in the political and public life, and its interlinkage with education, non-discrimination, emigration and employment.

The Roma National Center expresses concerns over absence of Roma women from political life. High levels of illiteracy, economic hardship, family responsibilities, and discrimination experiences represent obstacles to Roma women’s participation and representation in political and public processes. Above all, mainstream political parties hesitate to place Roma women candidates on electable position on party list, in either local or national elections. The State should take necessary measures to ensure equal opportunities for effective participation of Roma women in political life.

The information reflected in this report was collected from 39 Roma women, who participated in and benefited of the capacity building program “Roma women in Politics”. The program was implemented by the Roma National Center in partnership with the UN Women Moldova, in between November 2018 and November 2019.

1. **General comments**

In 2013, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women shared concerns about exclusion of Roma women from political and public life. The UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues expressed similar concern – “Roma women are largely absent from decision-making processes and public life, both at the local and central levels”.

Two Roma women were elected to local councils. They were among seven Roma women, who ran in Moldova’s local elections held on 14 June 2015.[[1]](#footnote-1) Previously, no Roma woman had ever run for local office. Increasing the representation of Roma women in decision making processes remains a priority only for civil society organizations and partners for development. For instance, both elected women took part in a series of pre-election training seminars organized by the Romani Women and Girls Network, and with support of UN Women Moldova.

In 2019 electoral race, 15 Roma women applied for mayor and councillor positions. As a result six women were elected as local councillors. These women have participated in the political training program “Roma women in Politics”. The program was implemented by the Roma National Center in partnership with UN Women Moldova. There was provided support, such as capacity building training sessions, mentorship, coaching and raising awareness, to 39 Roma women across the country. The program concluded with a national conference, where 90 Roma women and women with disabilities adopted a list of recommendations (resolution) to be addressed to public authorities and political parties. They called upon Moldovan authorities to ensure equal opportunities for women from underrepresented groups, to promote participation of Roma women in political life, and to properly address the discrimination cases, hate speech, harassment and electoral violence towards Roma women candidates, etc.

However, the number of Roma women that are politically active remains very low. They face a variety of obstacles within their community and in the broader society that limits their political engagement.

* Discrimination and sexist behaviour are “tools” used by different actors to restraint Roma women from participation in decision-making processes,
* Gender roles and family responsibilities inside families and Roma communities limit their chances to be involved in political and civic activities,
* Roma women who did not complete a gymnasium or a high school have low chances to even register as a candidate, due to bureaucratic procedures,
* Political parties tend to include in their list of candidates Roma men rather than women,
* During electoral campaign some political parties invite Roma women to collect signatures in the Roma communities without offering a spot in their electoral list,
* If political parties include Roma women in their list, than they are placed on non-electable positions,
* Corruption, political manipulation and instable political situation demotivate Roma women to participate in political-related activities.
1. **Review of 2013 CEDAW Recommendations**
2. **Lack of affirmative measures for effective political participation[[2]](#footnote-2)**

The State has not introduced yet procedures or affirmative measures aimed at ensuring the participation and representation of Roma women in elected offices. The 2016 Action Plan to Support Roma Population in Moldova focuses on integrating the Roma community into society in employment, education, healthcare, social protection, housing, and political life. During consultation process, the civil society organizations expressed their concerns over the fact that the Action Plan is gender-blind. The specific issues of Roma women, including political and civic participation obstacles, were not taken into account by the Government and consequently not reflected in the Action Plan.

The State neither considered the issues of Roma women when adopted the 2017 Strategy for Ensuring Equality between Women and Men and 2017 Strategy of Interethnic Relations Consolidation, and its action plans. Roma women activists say they were not invited to get involved in shaping these public policies.

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| Roma National Center calls on the Moldovan authorities:* To ensure that Roma inclusion policy addresses the specific needs of Roma women and girls. These measures should be properly budgeted, monitored and assessed.
* To establish relevant mechanism/s or platform/s where Roma women activists and organizations led by Roma women are engaged in shaping public policies.
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1. **Illiteracy and political participation[[3]](#footnote-3)**

High level of illiteracy among Roma women is a major obstacle that leaves them at the margins of political life. A Roma woman from village Drochia, district Drochia, said that she would like to run as a local councillor but she cannot write and read. If she gets elected she might be manipulated and forced to sign falsified documents. A 2014 UN Moldova report[[4]](#footnote-4) says that 45 per cent of Roma women have no formal studies (not even primary), compared to two per cent of non-Roma women and 33 per cent of Roma men. The State does not have effective programs for the reintegration of Roma girls who dropped out.

Other woman from village Ochiul Alb, district Drochia, mentioned that the lack of higher studies is also an important problem. Pre-election, election and post-elections procedures seem complicated and bureaucratic for woman that completed only a primary school or gymnasium. The 2011 Regional Survey on Roma Population[[5]](#footnote-5) points out that five out of ten Roma women from Moldova have no education and only one per cent graduated from lyceum, vocational school, or university.

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| Roma National Center calls on the Moldovan authorities:* To take appropriate measures to combat absenteeism and dropout among Roma girls, while reintegrating those who have already dropped out.
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1. **Roma mediators run for local council[[6]](#footnote-6)**

There are 30 Roma mediators working in 29 densely populated Roma communities. They are tasked to facilitate the access of Roma to public services. 20 mediators are women and three of them passed in local councils. The mediators are hired by local authorities and their remuneration is paid from the Government budget. The domestic legislation states that the mandate of local councillor is incompatible with the position of public servant. At the same time, the legislation does not define the position of Roma mediator as being public servant. However, due to discrepancies and contradictions in Moldovan legislation, the position of Roma mediator is considered as being incompatible with local councillor mandate.

VD, the only Roma woman mediator, who also served in local council in between 2015 and 2019, faced a court case. In June 2019, the Chisinau Appeal Court issued a decision on the margins of this case, where pointed out that Roma mediator can also hold the mandate of local councillor. Nevertheless, the Parliament has not amended yet any legislative act. Eight Roma women who also work as mediators considered this case an obstacle, as they could face similar experiences.

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| Roma National Center calls on the Moldovan authorities:* To solve the political and legal nature of incompatibilities that will allow Roma mediators, most of them women, to run for local offices and hold the local councillor mandate.
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1. **Early marriage and gender roles[[7]](#footnote-7)**

Early marriage is perceived as a cultural practice, still applied in some traditional Roma families and communities. This practice is accompanied by bride kidnapping, early pregnancy, and domestic violence. Although Roma woman mediators report early marriage cases to Roma activists and non-governmental organizations, these cases remain unreported to relevant state institutions. For instance, one of program’s beneficiaries[[8]](#footnote-8) brought her 14-year-old daughter, to all training sessions. She feared that her daughter might be kidnapped and forced to marry if she is home alone.

There are also many gender-ascribed roles inside Roma communities. Roma women end up assuming and carrying household responsibilities from an early age. Most women regard men as head of the family while they take care of children and household. Inequalities in the division of parenting duties leave women at the margins of political and civic life. At least eight women out of 39 could not participate in all program’s activities[[9]](#footnote-9) due to household duties.

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| Roma National Center calls on the Moldovan authorities:* To support awareness-raising and public information programmes about the negative effects of child marriage.
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1. **Other issues**
2. **Roma women and political parties**

The mainstream political parties invite Roma women to collect signatures and campaign for them, but hesitate to include them in their electoral lists. Once the women agree to run on party’s list, it is difficult to get a winnable seat. Roma women witness that top-five spots on the electoral list are dominated by men. Three out of 15 Roma women candidates reported that the parties changed their seat in the list of candidates without informing them. Consequently Roma women were placed on non-electable spots.

Most of women did not receive any financial support from party, only some electoral materials. Roma women described the 2019 electoral campaign as being dirty, full of lies and gossips, incorrect, with insults, and discriminatory.

High levels of endemic corruption, political instability and manipulation are also demotivating Roma women from participation in political life. They fear that political involvement might endanger the Roma community instead of bringing positive changes.

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| Roma National Center calls on the Moldovan authorities:* To raise awareness among political parties about the need of including Roma women candidates in winnable seats on the electoral lists.
* To allow political parties to make changes the list of candidates, not later than three weeks before Election Day.
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1. **Internal stigma and discrimination experiences**

Roma women fight a deeply rooted internal stigma due to hundreds years of marginalization, exclusion and intersectional discrimination. As a result they lack self-confidence when realizing their right to vote and be elected. They undervalue the power of their vote and do not believe that their voice can be heard. Most of women needed support and couching to overcome their internal stigma and to run for local elections.

A 2015 Study on equality[[10]](#footnote-10) shows that mainly negative perceptions prevail in case of Roma people, and this denotes persistence of negative stereotypes towards Roma. Another 2011 Sociological Study[[11]](#footnote-11) presents that every fourth respondent believes that Roma should be forced to live separately. At the same time, over 2/3 of interviewees consider that most of Roma women are fortune tellers and can put a spell on you if you do not give them money. A number of Roma women candidates declared that population portray them as beggars and liars, and have no trust that they can be a mayor or a councillor. The citizens will prefer to elect a non-Roma female candidate rather than Roma one.

A woman candidate from village Chetrosu, district Drochia, pointed out that the most difficult obstacle she had to overcome was ethnic discrimination and sexist behaviour. During the electoral race, 18 citizens from her village sent a complaint letter to local authorities, requiring her disqualification. The letter contained hate speech targeting her and other Roma. Another candidate from village Parcani, district Calarasi, reported cases of harassment on age, gender and ethnic grounds.

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| Roma National Center calls on the Moldovan authorities:* To design and implement programs aimed at developing leadership skills and abilities of young Roma girls.
* To properly address the cases of ethnic and gender discrimination, hate speech, harassment and electoral violence towards Roma women candidates.
* To promote examples of successful Roma women which were and are engaged in political and civic life.
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1. **Seasonal emigration, employment and political participation**

In Moldova only 16 per cent of Roma women aged over 15 are employed, in comparison to 43 per cent of non-Roma women and 28 per cent of Roma men.[[12]](#footnote-12) The employment opportunities are lower for Roma women because they lack professional qualifications and education, which often is a basic condition for a wide variety of vacancies. Most of Roma women work in the informal sector, without a contract and social security.

Widespread poverty and lack of job opportunities has caused many Roma to look for seasonal employment overseas. Roma mediators state that more than half of Roma women from their communities emigrate to seek for seasonal work, mostly in Russia, Ukraine, Germany and Poland. Program’s participants[[13]](#footnote-13) say that economic hardship and seasonal emigrational lower their chances to stand for local office or to get involved in any other political activity.

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| Roma National Center calls on the Moldovan authorities:* To allocate resources to expand the employment opportunities available to Roma women, including through education, literacy, vocational training, and market access.
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1. “Blazing trails, first Roma women elected to local council in Moldova”, [www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org), 1 September 2015, available at: <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2015/9/roma-women-elected-in-moldova>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2013 CEDAW Recommendation no. 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 2013CEDAW Recommendation no. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Study on the Situation of Romani Women and Girls in the Republic of Moldova”, UN Women, OHCHR and UNDP Moldova, 2014, available at: <<https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2014/study%20on%20the%20situation%20of%20romani%20women%20and%20girls%20in%20the%20republic%20of%20moldovaeng.pdf?la=en&vs=4513>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Profile of Roma Women and Girls”, National Bureau of Statistics, UNDP, UN Women, and UNECE, available at: <<https://www.md.undp.org/content/dam/moldova/docs/Publications/06_machet-FEMEILE-Roma_2018_ENG.pdf>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 2013 CEDAW Recommendation no. 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 2013 CEDAW Recommendation no. 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It is referred to those Roma women who have participated in the political training program “Roma women in Politics”, implemented by the Roma National Center in partnership with UN Women Moldova. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Study on Equality and Perceptions and Attitudes in the Republic of Moldova”, 2015, Council on the Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality, OHCHR and UNDP Moldova, available at: <<https://www.md.undp.org/content/dam/moldova/docs/Publications/ENG-Studiu%20Perceptii%202015_FINAL_2016_Imprimat.pdf>> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Perceptions of the Population of the Republic of Moldova on Discrimination: Sociological Study”, 2011, Soros Foundation-Moldova, available at: <<https://soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu_sociologic_EN.pdf>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Profile of Roma Women and Girls, *op. cit.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It is referred to those Roma women who have participated in the political training program “Roma women in Politics”, implemented by the Roma National Center in partnership with UN Women Moldova. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)