

Participative Consultations with Roma Women on Possibilities and Obstacles related to the Employment – situation analysis and recommendations

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Report on participatory consultations contributes to the following UN Women activity:

1.1. Organizing at least three participatory consultations tailored to Roma women and girls to provide them with an opportunity to be informed on project plans, to voice their needs and issues, and to provide the input and feedback to project interventions

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Defining terms

The main aim of participative consultations is to inform Roma women on current programs that the National Employment Service (NES) provides and to provide support to Roma women in approaching the labour market and finding the most appropriate ways to connect them with NES. One of the aims is to point out to the importance of education, but also additional education and pre-qualification which open the possibilities for finding a job. The result of participative consultation is an insight in needs of Roma women living in temporary, 'container' settlements and creation of most appropriate solutions for satisfaction of these needs in the field of employment.

Women's workshops is a phenomenon that marked the feminism as a movement for women's rights, since seventies of the 20th century. Workshops can be informative, educational or have supportive character. Aim of the workshops is primarily to empower women to exercising their human rights, and encourage them to participate in public/social life.

Making the safe space for participants to exchange opinions and experiences on different topics is of great significance, among which some are traditionally "feminine", and some are universal, like importance of education and advantages of economic empowerment.

This report is a result of activities initiated within the project "Strengthening Social Cohesion in the Labour Market through Support to Disadvantaged and Vulnerable Groups" implemented by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) with the financial support of the European Union. UN Women has committed to provide support to the project in the field of gender equality, which will include advisory, methodological and analytical support in defining methods and implementation models adequate for Roma women in the area of employment, including proposals for specific safeguard tools to ensure Roma women's needs are properly identified and reflected in the project interventions.

Reasons behind initiating these activities

Republic of Serbia showed readiness to begin a process of creating conditions for comprehensive and sustainable integration of Roma citizens by joining the international initiative Decade of Inclusion of Roma and adopting the Strategy for Improvement of the Position of Roma with following Action Plan for its implementation. As the duration period of the Decade of Roma is about to end, the assessment of successful and unsuccessful measures is to be performed.

General assessment of national, but also international public, independent institutions, as well as the European Union is almost uniform: Government of the Republic of Serbia did not do enough to overcome extremely bad economic and social position of Roma community, which leads to even deeper gap of inequality. The aim established in 2005, with the beginning of Decade of Roma, was to „improve the position of Roma and decreasing unacceptable differences which exist between Roma population and the rest of the population within past ten years, and is realized through activities on international and national level primarily characterized by raising attention of the

public to the problems in Roma community and strategic shaping of these problems". However, there is a long way between declarative statements and adopting number of strategic documents to their practical implementation. Achieving crucial integration in the society demands for involvement of all institutions on local and international level, hiring individuals on the positions of decision making, and organizing civil society and Roma community itself. One of the heritages of the Decade of Roma certainly is a legal strategic framework for planning and implementing long-term measures for decreasing poverty, fighting against discrimination and achieving equality of Roma citizens in society.

Out of the number of international documents that promote human rights to work and employment, the one important for the position of Roma women is the opinion of CEDAW Committee that through Concluding remarks directs the Republic of Serbia to improve position of Roma women in all social spheres and employment, with important support by the society. Due to the affirmative action implemented for many years by the Office for Human and Minority Rights, today we have significant number of young Roma people with high education. However, since these young people cannot find a job it seems like their efforts were useless. Through its Concluding remarks and recommendations, CEDAW Committee directs „increasing access to employment and entrepreneurship“. Consultative workshops organized in five Roma settlements, however point out to the problem of insufficient information provided to Roma women on possibilities for self-employment, the need for additional education or prequalification, and support in order for them to start their own business, and need for sufficient funds.

Consultative workshops confirmed the hypothesis that Roma community is one of the most vulnerable communities in Serbia, and that Roma women are particularly subjected to multi discrimination. Basic feature of socio – economic position of most of Roma men and women is low level of economic activity, high unemployment rate, and exclusion from public institutions. Two main factors that contribute to the unfavourable position of Roma population on the labour market and that limit Roma people to only low paid and precarious jobs, are low level of education and professional training and discrimination from potential employers. Efficiency of implementation of existing programs largely depends on preconditions such as profession and professional competencies of the potential users of programs of employment and self-employment. Monitoring of these measures by institution in charge and evaluation would contribute to defining better and more adequate new measures targeting the poorest and most vulnerable social groups, especially in less developed areas.

Roma women in Serbia are one of the groups that is mostly exposed to the risk of poverty. They also make big part of the grey economy, which is still main strategy of survival for Roma community. Inability to adequately respond to the needs of the market and free entrepreneurship decreases efficiency and level of integration of Roma community. Programs of the National Employment Service (NES) require certain level of professionalism and professional skills. Roma women, who traditionally drop out of school early do not have necessary skills and professional competencies, so even when NES and other institutions give certain advantages, Roma woman does not meet all of the necessary requirements for inclusion in these programs. Participants of consultative workshops never heard nor they have ever been informed on the NES activities. Even

though the intention of NES for initiating several activities towards increasing employability of number of Roma women was positive, these actions found Roma women unprepared. Without previous knowledge and skills for having their own jobs, without appropriate level of education but also inability to fulfil some of the demands of the banks, such as owning a property that can be used as a mortgage, most Roma women do not use these funds. Except inadequate measures that disable the access and usage of these measures, the biggest problem is the low level of information provided to Roma community on existence of these measures. Motivation of Roma women for using these measures is particularly important. During consultative workshops there was a problem to motivate women to get more information on possibilities for employment and to more frequently and regularly visit the NES.

The growth of grey economy increases the discrimination and exploitation of women, and while employment rate among women is dropping, Roma women have less and less chance to get a job. Woman in Roma family traditionally takes the role of mother and housewife. Early drop out from school leads woman to the situation that she is not competitive enough for labour market. The family is usually preventing her to continue education or compliment it with new skills which are necessary even for lowest paid jobs. Among unemployed and those who are waiting for a job longer than 2 years at least 65% are women. Of that number, over 70% are Roma women, followed by internally displaced persons and refugees from former Yugoslavia and returnees by the agreement of readmission. The last research shows that the price of social exclusion of Roma community is very high and intolerable in democratic society. Therefore, the recommendations of the EU are mostly directed to increasing employability and competitiveness on the labour market, which are harmonized with the strategy Europe 2020. Most of strategic documents do not deal with poverty of Roma family as something generational. At the same time, there is a lack of efficient and adequate institutional mechanisms that are satisfying real needs of Roma community in terms of employability and finding a job. The fact that poverty is the basic problem which majority of Roma people face has to be initial basis for creating mechanisms for its elimination.

There are three key issues that we have to deal with in order to decrease the poverty of Roma community:

- a. Creating adequate measures that correspond to the needs of Roma community depending on all relevant characteristics of community that often are not uniform and are related to number of factors;
- b. Include gender dimension as obligatory in development of these measures (in some cases give advantage to Roma women, with clear goal to include Roma women who belong to different social groups within their community);
- c. Establish SMART and gender sensitive indicators according to which improvement will be monitored and create new measures according to lessons learned principle.

The analysis of the situation in the field and real problems and needs of Roma women in Roma settlements will try to propose answers and solutions to these questions.

Activities in the field

Participatory consultation was chosen as a method of work, since it includes direct approach to women who live in settlements. In total, seven consultative workshops were organized in five 'container' settlements, made by the displacement of settlements Gazela and Belvil in Belgrade: Makis I and Makis II, Resnik, Kijevo, Jabucki rit – Pancevo. Two rounds of consultative workshops on different topics, with same participants, were held in Roma settlements Makis I and Makis II, while in the remaining three settlements one workshop was organized in each settlement. Since UNOPS has promoted activities of this project immediately before and after consultative workshops with Roma women, information about the Project were included in topics of workshops.

Characteristics of Roma settlements

These Roma settlements have been created in 2009 and 2011 by the displacement of informal Roma settlements under the bridge Gazela and Belvil settlement in New Belgrade. Settlements contain metal containers with electricity and heating and access to fresh water. One of the containers in settlements is designated to common activities and additional classes for school kids. School bus is driving the kids to and from schools. These so settlements are temporary and significant number of families were provided with accommodation through social housing projects. Only 9 families are left in one of these settlements. All of these settlements are far from the city, with badly organized public transportation. Besides that, most of the inhabitants and almost all women do not have tickets for public transportation so access to institutions in the city is very hard.

A total of 74 Roma women participated in the consultations. The age of Roma varied – most of the women were aged between 20 - 30 years, and slightly less were 30-40 - these two age groups dominated, but there were also young girls from 14 to 18 years who are married and have children, and slightly fewer women over 50 years. Only four women out of all workshop participants have a three-year vocational school (1 hairdresser, 2 secondary school for wood processing), one girl has graduated from business college, while approximately 5% have completed primary school. Other participants have not completed primary school, and about 20% were involved (or still) are in the Second Chance program. This unfavourable educational structure is reflected to the level of social inclusion. Only 7 women from all the settlements in which workshops were organized were previously employed (formally or informally) in some companies, mainly in the municipal parks of the City of Belgrade. The rest of the women were mainly involved in collection of secondary raw materials together with their husbands and others members of their families and selling old stuff in flea markets (New Belgrade, Pancevo).

Consultative workshop lasted approximately 2 hours, which is the optimum time to keep the talk interesting, but also the time that Roma women can spent away from their household chores. Workshops took place in the settlements or in homes of women or in the common premises in the container settlement, if it was available.

Through interviews with Roma women living in these settlements, we were exploring levels of their awareness about the NES activities, identifying the best ways for certain groups of Roma women (young Roma women, elderly Roma, and illiterate Roma women) to receive the information on labour market opportunities. One of the goals of these workshops is informing Roma women about the ways in which they can participate in the programs offered by the NES. Particular attention was directed at identifying barriers that Roma women are facing while trying to actively engage in a job search and potential employment.

Requirements for exercising the right to work

a. Educational Level

Improving extremely unfavourable educational level of the Roma community, especially women, is certainly the first condition to be fulfilled in order for this human right to be actually available to Roma women. The problem of low educational level has its roots in 20th century, and in the nineties it has reached the alarming proportions. A significant number of inhabitants of these settlements had left education during this period. The fact that very few women who participated in consultative workshops finished primary school, additionally demotivated them to find work. Second Chance Program, which is aimed to fill educational gaps and provide primary education to significant number of people without primary education, unfortunately, did not contribute to women from these settlements, and they did not receive a basic education.

b. The consequences of long-term multiple isolation and discrimination

The problem of physical isolation is very important for further analysis of the opportunities and obstacles related to the employment of Roma women, in particular Roma women from deprived backgrounds. When analysing the employability of Roma women, different levels of social inclusion/ exclusion of Roma settlements must be taken into account, in addition to the level of education. These five Roma settlements have been variously listed on a scale of employability of Roma women, primarily in relation to real social inclusion in society. Roma women from Jabucki rit in Pancevo have least possibilities to go out and raise their level of employability, while container settlement in Kijevo would be best rated on this imaginary scale. Roma women from Roma settlements Makis I and Makis II, which are very far away, are almost completely isolated. In addition to uncertainty when they will be moving to social housing, Roma women from these settlements were clear in their assessment of their position in the family, as completely dependent on their husbands. A few of them did not dare to take part in workshops, though men are familiar with its topics. During the interviews, participants were often coming back to the fact that decisions such as employment are in the hands of a men. This attitude is very firm, so any attempt to motivate the workshop participants to actively engage in job search ended with the necessity that their husbands give them permission to be activated. There is a slight difference between younger women, who moreover have small children and elderly Roma women (conditionally speaking, these are women of around 40 years). Younger women have almost no chance to overcome a series of obstacles, while those whose children are older have some chances to become active. However, all participants, regardless of age, are living in the deep conviction that they do not have the right to make decisions about their life or lives of their children. For many, this is the only possible way of thinking.

Problems

a. Work experience

Talking about work experience is actually reduced to a conversation about household work that these women often carry out. This unfortunately shows that the aspirations of Roma women are very low, that they expect very little from themselves and that the family and working in households are most important in their lives. The question of whether this is the issue also with men, do they have so many family obligations, as we expected, response was that "they work", "that they support their families," "they come tired from work" and "it's a women's job to take care of the family." Asked whether they would like to work and contribute to their families the answer was unanimous "Of course we'd like" but unsure how to reconcile the obligations to families, lack of education and a desire to make profit and contribute. It seems that this desire to work is only declarative, and that many Roma women are aware that the obstacles standing before them are not easy to surpass. The few women who were employed (formally or informally) worked in low paid jobs (eg. cleaning, public company in charge of city parks and lawns ('Gradsko zelenilo')). They expressed their satisfaction with job in scale "was satisfied with the job", "it was good", "salary is not big, and there is a lot of work." However, these few women have slightly different reflection on the position of women in the family and community. They are aware that the job they are doing is a minimum wage job primarily because they have no education, and they point out to school as the main obstacle to their own progress and of their family. All workshop participants are very aware that the experience is necessary to find job, and that they do not have one. This fact is very discouraging for them. Obstacles that seem too hard to overcome are placed in the forefront, and participants reflected less on the reasons for the position they are in, such as the abandonment of education, or even less on finding of the possible solutions.

b. Access to labour market

Workshop participants are mainly registered on the labour market during the resettlement process which included the City Secretariat for Social Protection. Given that almost none of them got a job offer, much less a job, they are of the opinion that the city was not interested in finding them a job and that the fact they are registered was not useful. Most often they do not understand what employees in NES are saying, while development of the individual employment plan represents an uncommon practice. Since they started to report to NES only recently (in late 2009 and during 2010) and they do not have actual experience in "job search", they are going to the NES without any expectations. None of the participants were aware of any of the programs that have been implemented or are now being implemented by the NES, and it is not only that they do not know the name, but they also do not know their content. They claim that no one ever notified them about a job nor offered a job training. They did not know about UNOPS by its name, but when they heard the description of the Project, around 40% recognized the program, and received leaflets with details. Terminology was unclear for most of them, despite printed materials. This UNOPS program got the approval of the participants, and all of them agreed that the conditions are very favourable, but also expressed some concern that men would have the advantage.

This was the most honest part of the workshop, and in the discussion we got to the real obstacles that they face:

- Spatial exclusion of Roma settlement - weak links between bus lines and not having bus tickets represent a major obstacle;
- Social exclusion of Roma settlement – paradoxically, all of the participants think that settlements from which they were displaced (so-called cardboard settlements that were in the centre of the city) are better than containers (although objectively container settlements provide slightly better conditions, have electricity and water, heating in winter) because they had been closer to the city and Roma were able to collect secondary raw materials and sometimes sold them in New Belgrade's flea market, they have been closer to the Centre for Social Work and it was easier to regularly report to the centre and employment services to achieve social benefits.
- No child care available to women- Roma families are big and women get married very young and become mothers at 16 or 17, so, in the life of Roma women, there are always children who are of school age and attending school and small children who cannot stay alone at home. In Roma communities households without elderly members (grandparents) are very common so all obligations related to household fall on a woman.
- Educational level – on the last place according to the participants, which confirms that the aspirations and self-confidence of Roma women are very low, willingness to deal with the backlog of stereotypes and all pervasive discrimination is very weak, there is a certain level of depression and despondency that is long-lasting and held on the willingness to change something.

c. Insufficient information

Weak, almost no flow of information between institutions and the local Roma community, especially women, seems to be one of the main problems that stands in the way of finding a job. The obstacles related to the low educational level, spatial isolation and social exclusion of Roma settlements all contribute greatly to more difficult sharing of information, however, the use of bureaucratic language, which Roma often do not understand, and ways of informing Roma women contribute to failure of achieving the main goal: timely information with the aim of employment and labour activation. The most efficient way to inform (applicable not just to the Roma community) is a face to face conversation, although printed material is certainly welcome, especially with contact information (address, telephone number). However, a conversation where questions are asked and adequate responses given, brings the best results. One of the results of conveying information through direct conversations and working in Roma settlements is certainly the work on raising self-esteem and motivation for work activation.

Challenges

a. Prejudice and discrimination

This is the important issue and more time should be allocated to this discussion. Discussions during all workshops showed that Roma women are discriminated on many levels, almost constantly. The position of Roma women in the family is characterized by total dependence on the male family members, first father and brothers, and then the husband and his family. In the broader society, the position of Roma women is more difficult than the situation of Roma men. Roma women are often the victims of discrimination in institutions and public space. Prejudices in the community also affect more for women than men. The field of employment is probably the most prominent example of covert discrimination. Most participants know a variety of events and incidents which have characteristics of discrimination, mostly indirect. However, the same participants (most of them) did not have direct experience with discrimination, mainly because these women are not offered employment nor (except a few of them) have ever been employed or done something outside of Roma settlements or their immediate family. What is concerning is that little is known about discrimination and little is discussed in the community, and discriminatory behaviour often goes unrecognized. Even more concerning is that Roma women are „accustomed“ to discriminatory behaviour whether it comes from the immediate family environment, or immediate community, or coming from the institutions and the wider society. The fact that most Roma women who participated in consultative workshops think that it is "normal" and "reasonable" that all decisions are made by the husband/ father, and that they cannot expect to be treated better by the institutions due to their low level of education, show an imposed sense of inferiority and lack of self-confidence of these women.

b. Changes

Thinking about changes is not common among participants of the consultative workshops. Belief in change for the better is almost non-existent. The only thing they hope for is to solve the housing problem, and they are awaiting this with trepidation. On the one hand, they fear they will not get a social apartment or a house, and on the other hand, there is a fear of living in unfamiliar conditions in buildings. In particular, they fear that they will not be able to pay utility fees in regular social housing and will end up homeless. There is a lack of information related to this issue, which increases uncertainty. However, the participants made clear that they like the attention they got in these conversations and that rarely someone asks them for an opinion.

Participants at these workshops are aware that the lack of education and early marriage is closely linked to the level of employability and competitiveness in the labour market, and expressed that, if they could change something they would go to school instead of marrying young.

c. Acquiring qualifications

Despite the fact they are not motivated for active job search, participants of consultative workshops expressed a clear position that education is still the biggest obstacle. Roma women from the container settlements see potential chance in additional training courses for some occupations. However, this is still not their decision, but their husbands. On the other hand, the

society supports more men from the community to find work, especially in jobs that are generally more appropriate for men than for women. This further discourages Roma women from active job search.

Recommendations

1. Access to employment for Roma women should be based on the specific needs of women from different social backgrounds, with the fulfilment of certain preconditions such as the improvement of educational level and support in terms of child care.
2. Create individual services within the labour market that will meet the needs of Roma women adequately.
3. Information has to be provided continuously to Roma women, especially those living in Roma settlements, through the electronic media and printed leaflets in Roma and Serbian language.
4. Particular attention should be paid to informative-advisory work with Roma women in Roma settlements that should be supportive, motivating and continuous.
5. Create conditions for training, additional education, prequalification of Roma women that will take place in the vicinity of Roma settlements, with support for child care during training.
6. Organize programs for self-employment and enabling access to micro-credit more suitable for Roma.

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