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Report on Trainings: “Increasing Participation of Roma and Egyptian Women in Decision Making through their Vote”

Between January and March 2013, the *Best Practices for Roma Integration* project implemented a series of activities to increase the participation of Roma women in public and political life.

Some 59 Roma women from different professional backgrounds, including members of the Roma Political Academy¹, NGO activists, learned more during the training sessions held about taking an active role in the political process in their country, with education on basic individual rights providing a starting point for developing a better understanding of the importance of political participation.

Through practical and role playing exercises, participants gained a deeper insight into the importance of political participation. They also had the opportunity to learn of some of the challenges they may face as women in pursuing a political career, based on the first-hand experiences of two Roma women, Meleqe Rrenja and Etleva Tare, past candidates in both local and parliamentary elections in Albania, who took part in the event.

These training sessions served to encourage Roma women to become active and exercise their legally guaranteed political rights. They can play a crucial role in ensuring greater participation of Roma in political life, and contributing to greater gender balance in decision-making inside Roma communities.

Background

Roma women in Albania are unrepresented in elected positions and offices both at the national and local level. There are no statistics on their participation in the electoral processes but overall they constitute a small portion of the electorate. Roma NGOs report that Roma women are less active than other groups in politics due to lack of information regarding their civil rights including the right to vote; low awareness regarding electoral processes and procedures; frequently insufficient understanding regarding the importance of participating in elections; lack of ID documents needed for voting, non-inclusion in the voter registers; reluctance on the side of

¹ Roma Political Academy is an initiative of the Open Society Foundation in Albania (OSFA) which engaged educated Roma youth in theoretical sessions addressing democracy, politics and activism. In this way, OSFA aims to improve their analytical and negotiation skills and further encourage their direct participation in negotiating concrete solutions in their communities. In addition, the Foundation organized several field trips for young Roma activists and traditional CSO leaders in the majority of the areas inhabited by Roma. During the field visits, the participants acknowledged the situation of Roma neighbourhoods and families, engaged in discussion with community members and leaders and further identified effective interventions mainly based on voluntary contribution.

mainstream parties to specifically target the Roma population in their election platforms and campaigns; vulnerability of Roma voters with regard to election-related practices of corruption and other irregularities (vote buying, pressure on voters, group and proxy voting); family voting etc.

Description of activities

With the assistance of two specialized experts, BPRI developed a training curriculum based on the publications of the ‘Women in Government’ project and other OSCE reports, including “Women’s Rights in Albanian Legislation”, “The Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania” and others. Moreover, a leaflet was prepared by a Roma Gender and Political Expert in both Albanian and Roma languages. The leaflet is used to raise awareness among Roma communities about electoral processes and why is it important to vote.

Three training sessions were held:

- In Tirana, on 6-7 March 2013, twenty Roma and Egyptian students, all members of Roma Political Academy, attended this session.
- In Gjirokaster on 11-12 March 2013, twenty Roma and Egyptian women from Lezha, Shushica, and Gjirokastra participated. During one and half day session these women got better informed on women’s rights in general, focusing more on importance of voting and representation in the local and central decision-making.
- In Pogradec on 27-28 March 2013, the training involved 19 Roma and Egyptian women from Grabian, Lushnje and Pogradec and Fushe-Kruje.

Training sessions focused on voting techniques, elections, implementation and understanding of the process, political and electoral issues in general. Participants discussed women’s rights as voters, candidates and decision makers, gender mainstreaming as well as the relevant laws and the National Strategy on Gender Equality.



Follow up

Participants expressed their interest to be involved as domestic observers during elections which are in June. This initiative is being followed up by Open Society Foundation in Albania (OSFA) and a group of 30 Roma activists who are connected with the network of independent observers supported by OSFA and the American Embassy. A list of 30 students and Roma activists was prepared and sent to the forum of domestic observers.



Participants expressed that they liked the methodology of the training. It was very interactive and many role-plays were facilitated by the trainers. Participants first discussed different types of rights (reproduction, labour rights, gender equality) for better understanding the connection between their needs and the electoral process. Participants also responded to the trainers' approach to use story-telling and different visual tools (drawing). Overall there was a good mix of women - some had NGO experience, others were stay-at-home moms mainly from Gjirokaster and Grabian.

Meleqe's and Eva's presentations helped the women understand why it is important to vote and participate in political processes in general. They expressed a lot of distrust of Albanian candidates because of the decades of broken promises. They are not sure how to assess different candidates

- most are led by personal interests and assistance they receive. Trainers pointed out the importance of looking at the larger picture, not just one's personal situation.