

## Report on the Roma Women Voter Education Workshops

On 11 and 18 October 2013, the Best Practices for Roma Integration (BPRI) project in co-operation with Roma Women Rights Centre and Gjirokastër municipality organized two workshops on Political Discussion for Roma Women Voter Education, in Tirana and Gjirokastër.

Some 32 Roma and Egyptian women from different professional backgrounds, including members of the Roma Political Academy and NGO activists, discussed the involvement of Roma women in the political life and more specifically during parliamentary elections in 2013. Participants from Tirana, Shushice, Fier, Pogradec, Korce, Gjirokastër, Lushnje, Grabian, Lezhe, and Fushe-Kruja shared their experiences regarding their involvement in campaigns, results, challenges faced, etc.

The participants were involved in practical working group exercises, where they discussed the importance of political participation both as voters and as candidates. They also had the opportunity to share their personal experiences and community examples of involvement as voters and as contact persons for informing the Roma community about voting and registration procedures. In addition, they identified positive aspects of their work in raising Roma women's participation in the electoral process.

Ms. Etleva Tare and Ms. Meleqe Rrenja, two prominent Roma women, shared their efforts to run for elections and the challenges they faced during this process. The last session of the workshop provided participants with the opportunity to network with each other and prepare concrete work plans regarding their future participation in political and public life. These plans and ambitions included, for example, the monitoring of Roma participation in local elections and involvement of Roma and Egyptian women as election observers during local elections in 2015.



## 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 the lack of information regarding their civil rights, low awareness of electoral processes and procedures, insufficient understanding of the importance of participating in elections, lack of ID documents needed for voting, non-inclusion in the voter registers, reluctance of mainstream parties to target the Roma population in their election platforms and campaigns, vulnerability of Roma voters to election-related corruption and other irregularities (vote buying, pressure on voters, group and proxy voting), family voting etc.

Before the parliamentary elections (held in June 2013), BPRI organized a series of activities with Roma and Egyptian women, aiming to increase their participation in the electoral processes, their capacity to advocate independently and become a lobbying force. Three training sessions for Roma Women on Voter Education, and preparation of a training curriculum and educational flyer for voters on their rights, took place in Tirana, Gjirokaster, and Pogradec. Overall 59 participants attended these training events.

During these trainings, Roma and Egyptian women gained a deeper insight into the importance of political participation. They also had the opportunity to learn about 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 these events. These training sessions encouraged 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.

## Description of activities

The workshop started with discussion of *monitoring Roma women's participation as voters during parliamentary elections*. During this session, the women who participated in previous BPRI voter education activities shared their point of view regarding the impact of the information provided and their active engagement since the training in raising the women's participation in election processes.

All participants expressed that the information they received during the voter education trainings before elections was valuable and made them for the first time in their life interested in the electoral process. They previously considered this to be a "men's issue" and mostly did not vote at all or voted as their husband preferred.

By using some of the tools from the OSCE/ODIHR [Handbook for Monitoring Women's Participation in Elections](#) for moderating the discussion, participants shared their personal and community examples in this field. Ms. Claudia Vollmer, Head of Democratization Department, and Ms. Alenka Verbole, Senior Gender Advisor, OSCE Presence in Albania, attended some of these sessions to help include Roma women in the upcoming OSCE activities such as the "Women in Parliament".

Some of the main findings of this discussion were:

- Almost all the women participated in discussions and meetings with politicians before elections. In some communities, such as Lushnje, Gjirokaster, Lezha, and Grabian, women got organized and together with men met with representatives of different political leaders. Some others (from Fushe-Kruja, Tirana, Korce and Pogradec) participated in political discussions which were facilitated by projects focused on Roma. These meetings were organized in the centres of villages, towns, coffee bars, etc.
- Few of the participants were familiar with the political programs before elections. It should be noted that Roma communities did not understand the electoral programmes properly at times and did not know how to monitor or call for their implementation.
- All the women knew who is/are their representative in Parliament.
- Participants reported that the Roma community faced problems with registration of voters, especially in Gjirokaster. About 25 Roma individuals from Gjirokaster did not vote because of this reason.
- There are special circumstances limiting women's access to documents and voting. They are at times registered in another city or village, away from where their actual place of residence.



The second session focused on ***best practices and challenges faced by Roma and Egyptian women during parliamentary elections in 2013***. The participants were divided into five working groups which identified the positive aspects of their work in raising Roma women's participation, as well as the risks and challenges they faced during the parliamentary elections.

#### Best Practices:

- Roma women voluntarily disseminated information in their communities on electoral process,
- Meeting with candidates during electoral campaign and bringing to their attention the issues they are dealing with on a daily basis,
- Higher level of participation of women in the voting process,
- Men supported women during awareness raising campaigns.



#### Challenges:

- Lack of education among Roma and Egyptian women,
- Bad practices (buying-selling the vote),
- Lack of interest /discrimination from political leaders,
- Lack of information on electoral processes,
- Lack of information on candidates / political programs,

- Lack of documents, voter registration problems,
- Some community leaders make other members follow their favorite party,
- Lack of trust,
- Broken electoral promises,
- Family voting,
- No interest from community in the voting and electoral process,
- Threatened to vote for a certain party; threat of firing in case of refusal to vote for a certain party.

At the end of the training, participants worked in groups and proposed **follow up steps** for raising the involvement of Roma women, creating a women's network, promoting women who wanted to run for elections and preparing for the upcoming local elections.

Planned activities:

- Consolidating the network of Roma women activists from all over Albania and organizing periodical meetings,
- Disseminating information on human and civil rights among other Roma and Egyptian women in their communities; raising awareness at the grassroots level about the importance of voting and participation in decision making,
- Meeting with members of parliament/ deputies representing their zone and following up on their electoral promises,
- Identifying, encouraging and promoting prominent Roma and Egyptian women who may be potential candidates and have interest in running for elections,
- Using media as a tool for raising public awareness about daily issues faced by Roma communities,
- Continuing to be united and raise awareness, supporting the leadership of Roma and Egyptian women,
- Collaborating with public institutions and bringing to their attention the Roma women's concerns, while proposing recommendations and potential solutions.

**List of Participants**

Nr.	Name	Municipality/commune
1	Bajame Zeqiri	Grabian
2	Alma Fetahu	Grabian
3	Fatmira Dajlani	F.Kruje
4	Anila Harapi	Tirane
5	Manjola Veizi	Tirane
6	Meleqe Rrenja	Tirane
7	Fife Jonuzi	Grabian
8	Orientina Jonuzi	Grabian
9	Refiola Milanj	Lushnje
10	Arta Milanj	Lushnje
11	Liljana Milanj	Lushnje
12	Lumturije Ali	Pogradec
13	Asije Ali	Pogradec

14	Marjana Gremi	Pogradec
15	Drita Trendafilii	Pogradec
16	Nevila Rrenja	Llakatund
17	Flora Ioshi	Llakatund
18	Ardita Cela	Fier
19	Aurora Koci	Tirane
20	Alidije Latifi	Llakatund
21	Dorina Azemi	Tirane
22	Vera Papa	Lezhe
23	Sadije sula	Lezhe
24	Mirjeta Ramizi	Tirane
25	Myska Hajdini	Gjirokaster
26	Thanas Hajdini	Gjirokaster
27	Ajet Sulejmani	Gjirokaster
28	Valbona Sulejmani	Gjirokaster
29	Viola Gramozi	Gjirokaster
30	Adelina Bregu	Gjirokaster
31	Thanas Bregu	Gjirokaster
32	Magdalena Dalipi	Gjirokaster