



Gender Equality and Antidiscrimination for Roma

MODULE 3

Promotion and awareness raising on the rights of girls

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A SHORT TIMELINE

After the important achievement of the right to vote in many Western countries in 1920, women's rights have been the subject throughout the 20th century of various conventions and treaties promoted by the UN or by associations and aimed at countering the obvious discrimination and inequalities that undermine women's emancipation. Beginning with the UN's founding act, which in Article 1 enshrines the promotion of and respect for "(...) human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion." the struggle for gender equality has experienced periods of effervescence and mobilization.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the issue of the gender gap, intertwined with counterculture movements and the contestation of patriarchal models, extended to include freedom of reproductive choice, the right to equal employment, the contestation of domestic violence, and equal rights in all spheres of life. In this climate of strong ferment for women's emancipation, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) constituted an instrument aimed at promoting substantive equality between men and women in all fields, from politics to economics, from family to education. Its cardinal principles are equality; non-discrimination; empowerment. Accordingly, the obligations of states that have ratified it concern: the amendment of discriminatory laws, the adoption of concrete measures to promote gender equality, and the measures necessary to ensure equal access for women in all areas of public and private life; in addition, CEDAW places special emphasis on actively promoting cultural change that values women. In this regard, some of its articles specifically address practices related to areas of private and public life through which gender stereotypes can be countered. Examples include the modification of school curricula and the sharing of family responsibilities between men and women, as well as access to family planning services. Among the most significant achievements resulting from the ratification of CEDAW we can include first the increase in female literacy rates and greater representation of women in national parliaments. In addition, this Convention has helped expand women's access to health services including reproductive health and put the issue of gender-based violence on the political agenda of countries that have ratified it.

The cultural climate of the 1990s, resulting from the end of the Cold War and the spread of democratic governments, resulted, also thanks to the introduction of gender quotas sanctioned by the CEDAW, in greater participation of women in political life and their attainment of leadership positions. In this context of renewed focus on human rights and equality, the Fourth World Conference on Women adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. Despite being a non-binding plan of action and lacking an official monitoring mechanism, as was the case with the CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration, adopted by 189 countries, contributed to further strengthening the principles enshrined in the CEDAW by outlining precise areas of intervention for gender equality.

It focuses on women's empowerment and economic and social rights, addressing critical areas such as economic and political participation, education, and violence against women in armed conflicts, as well as domestic violence. It also recognizes the importance of the intersectional approach to realizing women's rights. Indeed, the barriers to women's full equality and advancement are diverse and intersect with other forms of discrimination (such as those based on race, social class, age, culture, disability, religion, being a migrant, etc.) generating specific experiences of oppression.) generating specific and complex experiences of oppression.

The critical areas of concern on which the document formulates specific proposals for intervention aimed at strategic objectives are twelve in number, namely:

- A. *Women and poverty*
- B. *Education and training of women*
- C. *Women and health*
- D. *Violence against women*

- E. *Women and armed conflict*
- F. *Women and the economy*
- G. *Women in power and decision-making*
- H. *Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women*
- I. *Human rights of women*
- J. *Women and the media*
- K. *Women and the environment*
- L. *The girl child*

The Beijing Declaration is therefore a landmark document that has had a significant impact on legislation and policy, helping to outline a distinctive plan of action for gender equality and women's empowerment and, above all, emphasizing that this is an essential prerequisite for human society.

“Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development, and peace. A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people centered sustainable development.”¹

Awareness-raising about the crucial importance of women's rights and the principle of gender equality, which is now considered a customary norm in international law, has resulted in several other initiatives at the international, national, and local level to promote gender equality and equality. For instance, the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, adopted in Istanbul in 2011, is a landmark international treaty for the protection of women's rights. It is the first legally binding international instrument establishing a comprehensive legal framework to combat gender-based violence in all its forms. From a social point of view, its special feature is the recognition of violence against women as a serious violation of human rights. It is neither a private nor a public order issue; gender-based violence is a complex phenomenon with serious repercussions on the physical and psychological health of its victims and society. From a normative point of view, the convention provides a broad and detailed definition of violence, succeeding in providing for the adoption of legislative measures, both criminal and civil, against several forms of ill-treatment that were not recognized as such (e.g. economic and psychological violence). It also establishes an independent monitoring system by GREVIO (Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence). The structure of the Istanbul Convention and its normative and societal effects are better explained in section 5 of this paper. However, it is worth emphasizing how it has contributed substantially to raising the awareness of public opinion and of a (unfortunately still minority) section of professionals working in institutions (judiciary, law enforcement, medical personnel, social workers).

The cultural change, which is both desirable and necessary, so that these postulates can be translated into an effective promotion of gender equality, counteracting the sexist and discriminatory stereotypes that feed the foundations of gender inequality, is a multidimensional and complex process of which we are perhaps seeing the beginning.

The effect of these important legal instruments is not taken for granted and intersects with the cultural, institutional and, above all, economic investment choices of different countries.

In short, the actual impact of legislation on women's rights is held back by objective conditions concerning political and financial commitment on the part of states and the courage to challenge established attitudes and practices. Finally, as highlighted in the Beijing Declaration, it is crucial that policy actions are based on the recognition of the intersection between gender discrimination and other forms of discrimination. The

¹ Ivi, p. 7

condition of a migrant or refugee, sick or culturally deprived woman is not and will never be the same as that of a fully integrated first-world woman. Although this does not mean that they do not both suffer various forms of discrimination.

1. WHERE ARE WE AT TODAY?

We can say that the level of protection of women's rights in Europe is generally higher than in other areas of the world, yet the ratification of the Conventions, both in terms of legislation and concrete implementation, has been uneven in the member states. This is due to the political and economic investment choices of different countries. Taking equal pay for equal work as an example, which despite being illegal reaches an average of 16% in the EU countries, the gender pay gap is overall higher in the Eastern countries (in Estonia it reaches 25%) and lower in the Scandinavian countries. Just as significant are the differences in employment rates by gender, although in no country do women have a job that pays as much as men.

At an overall glance, the indices that show a greater gender gap concern pay, employment, decision-making power, education and access to resources and services.

The latest EIGE² report, which monitors Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) by publishing reports every five years, defines many of the challenges stated in 1995 as still relevant. Among these the most obvious, but not the only ones, are the gender pay gap, unequal distribution of unpaid work and experiences of gender-based violence. Leaving aside for now the issue of experiences of gender-based violence, which will be better addressed in section 5 of this paper, let us briefly outline the most critical aspects characterizing gender discrimination in some key and interconnected issues, which summaries the objectives of the Beijing Platform Action.

2. GENDER INEQUALITIES IN THE ECONOMY

Gender inequality in the formal economy is characterized by lower employment rates for women and by the prevalence of precarious or part-time work (about four times more likely than men), even with the same educational qualifications. This condition is particularly evident for women from vulnerable ethnic and migrant backgrounds and single mothers. In addition, due to the difficulty of accessing the finance needed to start a business, women rarely start entrepreneurial careers. Their concentration in the public sector, where jobs have further decreased following the post-2008 economic crisis, has further exposed them to the risk of in-work poverty.

However, the figure that appears most significant, also in relation to the future of the economy and climate change, is the low presence of women in precisely those sectors that are now booming, such as high-tech, IT, and ICT in general, as well as in all professions related to the environment and energy. The concentration of women in the education and care sectors follows exactly the gender stereotype with a significant under-representation of men in these same sectors and this fact, in addition to economic considerations, also implies a lack of opportunity for confrontation and a wealth of ideas and visions for the future, with men at the helm of environmental policies and women at great risk of losing their jobs due to automation and digitalization.

As far as the strictly economic aspects are concerned, this employment gap leads to a lower earning capacity of women, confirming the wage gap and, consequently, also feeding the pension gap. The all-female propensity to care for children and the elderly, i.e. the employment of a large part of women's time in unpaid work (about 13 hours a week more than men) is also confirmed in recent years. The issue of

² <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/beijing-25-fifth-review-implementation-beijing-platform-action-eu-member-states>

elderly care calls into question two other important circumstances. First, the difficulty for families to benefit from public and social services that can take care of them and, as far as rights are concerned, parental leave time, which is less for men. In this respect, greater harmonisation of minimum rights is desirable so that parental leave can promote gender equality rather than traditional inequalities. However, for the time being, these conditions collectively impact women's risk of poverty in a very significant way and with even more devastating effects for Roma communities. Here, incomes below the poverty line affect four out of every five employed women, and many Roma girls do not complete secondary education³.

3. GENDER-RESPONSIVE PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE, SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SERVICES

Public infrastructures, such as care services for the elderly and children or social protection services, that are gender responsive must be designed to ensure gender equality in society. It is important that these services consider the specific needs of their users depending on whether they are women or men. To give an example related to social protection, women often cannot access benefits because they are part of a household. The same applies at a broader level to welfare, pension, and taxation systems. There is no doubt that, being based on family income, welfare systems exclusively penalize women who are dependent on their partner. In the same way, taxation systems disadvantage the low-income partner (almost always the woman) within a couple, with the consequence of influencing the choice to enter the labor market and thus increasing the risk of female poverty. In the same line of discrimination, pension systems, which are, moreover, subject to increasingly substantial downsizing, exacerbate the gender gap by the very fact that they are based on long, continuous, and well-paid working careers: exactly those that women can rarely afford to access due to their caring responsibilities. It has been assessed that all measures of downsizing public spending, from pensions to subsidies and from health to care services, have had an even more specific negative impact on women.

Another end of the discussion concerns transport-related services. Here, too, it is established that women are less likely to own a car and thus to be able to move around independently, as well as to be able to travel longer distances. In most cases, women's travel patterns, also due to the disproportionate amount of time they devote to care, are shorter and more complex. Although new transport technologies may provide a favorable opportunity to challenge these behaviors, careful consideration of these gender aspects would be necessary in designing more equitable and sustainable transport policies for all. This would also help to de-construct the symbolically established pair of masculinity and automobility. A final aspect concerns the implementation of smart home technologies, which could translate into a transformative advantage on domestic work and care tasks.

4. PARITY DEMOCRACY

Equal democracy is a model of democracy that aspires to achieve full and substantial equality between men and women in all areas of social, political, and economic life. Therefore, it is not about mere numerical equality, but refers to a concrete and active participation of women as well as men in public life. A balanced representation in all the different spheres of life would have as an immediate reflection a greater richness of viewpoints, arguments, foresight of possible risks and interests involved in policies. Moreover, it would improve decision-making because of the confluence of different viewpoints and strategies.

The progress achieved in this field in the European Union's policies is still too little and has little impact on social life. We can identify the reasons for this in the way in which the issue of equal democracy is

³ ibidem

approached. These are still too fragmented and, more generally, lack a transversal gender mainstreaming approach that considers the intended objectives. Furthermore, gender mainstreaming tools such as gender impact assessments or gender budgeting are scarcely applied in this context. About European gender mainstreaming investments in specific sectors, indicators do not always allow for a clear and in-depth reading of the funds and investments expressly dedicated to these objectives.

A special discourse deserves instead, as mentioned before, the topic of the European Union's environmental policies also related to climate change and about which there is widespread sensitivity. Here too, despite the fact that gender differences in environmental behavior as well as in the impacts of climate change are clear, the European Union's policy appears to be essentially gendered blind. Solutions are adopted that focus on market, technological and security measures, which nevertheless continue to exclude people-based approaches.

In the decision-making processes, progress towards gender balance appears slow and uneven. In addition to the proven under-representation of women in all fields of decision-making (politics, economics, business, health, research and innovation, armed conflicts, environment, media, science and sport), differences between sectors persist, with levels of representation further decimated in the areas of economic and trade policies, sport, diplomacy and the European Court of Justice. This unequal distribution once again confirms the influence of gender stereotypes and discriminatory mechanisms in the under-representation of women and in their choice of leadership positions. The risk of online harassment has now also become an additional element that contributes, together with inequalities in care responsibilities, to the disadvantage of the decision to pursue careers in leadership. On these, then, always hangs the shadow of stigma, which is reflected in the way women in leadership positions are perceived, treated, and valued; it is not difficult to understand if one only looks at the 'media treatment' they receive.

A timid result of governmental actions in favor of gender balance in decision-making was achieved mainly through the role of binding quotas and legislative electoral quotas. Alongside this, the proportion of women on the boards and in the national parliaments of the Member States improved slightly. The most immediate benefits of this tentative change were observed in improved corporate financial performance, less corruption, greater awareness of environmental protection and better career progression of other women in the same organization.

5. PEACEFUL AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES

The empowerment of women is directly linked to the possibility of promoting peaceful and truly inclusive societies. This goal can be pursued to the extent that emancipation can be ensured for women who experience serious human rights violations and, more generally, for those belonging to minorities, women with disabilities and those affected by armed conflicts. Decisive and targeted actions and measures are needed to ensure gender-sensitive asylum processes while respecting minority rights. Despite the efforts made so far by the European Union in this direction, it is still necessary for gender to be mainstreamed in all security and defense activities. Greater gender sensitivity needs to be promoted in asylum processes, which are known to expose women to serious risks of gender-based violence and human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Again, approaches and gender sensitivity vary even significantly across countries; it is possible that seeking asylum may expose women and girls to an even greater risk of vulnerability.

The great challenge represented by the increasing migration flows cannot be tackled in a merely bureaucratic and border control manner. This approach, which is often used for political ends, has often resulted in human rights violations. The EU is taking the necessary measures to adhere to the Istanbul Convention, recognizing violence against women as a serious human rights violation that can be grounds for asylum. However, the response to these measures is different in the different member states. For example, in Hungary, there is a lack of reception and integration of refugees; in Greece, reception facilities are severely inadequate. A positive example is Belgium, which has provided specific services for pregnant

women and single parents. However, it is well known that violence against migrants occurs frequently along the Balkan route.

Daily intersectional discrimination affects women from ethnic and religious minorities, LBTQI persons and women with disabilities. A sad example are the girls from Roma communities who, in addition to experiences of discrimination in various areas of life, suffer forced sterilization. African women also face increasing difficulties in employment because of their religious identity; 44% of transgender women have experienced an average of three or more physical or sexual assaults in the last year. Finally, women with disabilities, in addition to facing gender and disability stereotypes in their daily lives, often run the risk of forced sterilization.

6. RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND FLAME RETURNS

With respect to the ongoing challenge women face to conquer and enjoy their rights, an alarm signal that should not be underestimated concerns the rise of the 'anti-gender' movements coupled with the undermining of the role of civil society organizations and women's rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in many member states.

The assumption from which the 'anti-gender' movements move is the contestation of the concept of 'gender' as a social construct, influenced by cultural and individual factors, whereas they only accept a binary view of gender as a binary and immutable biological reality. Essentially, the distorted and simplistic vision of the 'anti-gender' movements, often combined with firm religious convictions, returns, if ever there was a need, to affirm a hierarchical view of the family related to the superiority of men over women. A further corollary of this ideological view is the strong opposition to women's right to self-determination over their own bodies and reproductive choice. In addition to being a voice against the Istanbul Convention, these movements have taken legal action to prevent abortion and the teaching of sex education and reproductive health. A further, but not secondary, aspect related to this phenomenon is the fallout on civil society organizations and women's rights non-governmental organizations that have been subjected to defamation campaigns (also with the complicity of the media, as in Romania and Hungary) and towards which governments have undertaken restrictive policies (in Hungary the government has banned gender studies in higher education and has taken actions that seriously threaten the human rights of women, asylum seekers and LGBTQI* people). Specifically, the overall hostile measures towards NGOs consist of increased difficulties in accessing funding (as in the case of the various protection networks against violence against women in Italy) and increased state control systems, which have become more restrictive.

Despite the many achievements in the field of women's rights and emancipation, we are today witnessing a brutal increase in violence against women. An example of this is statistics on gender-based violence, which does not tend to decrease, and new forms of violence linked to digitization⁴. It is no coincidence that 90% of deepfake victims are women. Even the rise of the "anti-gender" movements seems to condense a disproportionate reaction to the changes taking place and, first, to the increase in economic insecurity resulting from neoliberal economies.

As Silvia Federici⁵ clearly pointed out in her analysis of the process of female subordination as a founding element in the construction of capitalism, violence has many different challenges depending on where it takes place, but its constituent element is the claim of economic autonomy by women. This instance intersected with the crisis of wage labor and male labor in general, resulting in precarization and even more exacerbated by the economic crisis of 2008. This condition, in fact, further undermined the traditional

⁴ <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-rec-no-on-digital-violence-against-women/1680a49147>

⁵ Federici Silvia, *Witches, Witch-hunting, and Women*, Dev Publishers & Distributors, 2023

exchange underlying marriage: unpaid domestic work in exchange for economic security. It is therefore conceivable that these objective conditions, the assertion of rights by women and the slow conquest of autonomy and of reproductive choice, are perceived as a substantial threat to a condition of certainty and security that, it's long since gone.

7. GOOD PRACTISES, OR GOOD PROPOSALS?

What steps must be taken to ensure that the setbacks in the pursuit of women's rights do not undermine the effects of the legal instruments that have been won?

First, to promote as much as possible the political will, which appears to be lacking, so that it may urgently address the social challenges of increasing poverty and the priority of the Sustainable Development Goals. on poverty, health, education, affordable energy, climate action, decent work, reducing inequalities and achieving peaceful and inclusive societies.

To increase the economic independence of women by improving the welfare services of the countries. In addition to a marked improvement in the conditions for equal access to paid work, the crucial issue of caring for the elderly and people with disabilities must be addressed, which is carried out to a significantly greater extent by women and often in unstable conditions and with a lack of safeguards. At the same time, it is essential to respond to health care shortages both to ensure a higher level of individual well-being and to ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services, which have been threatened by retrogressive policies in some Member States.

In addition, as the EIGE report suggests, to extend the adoption of quotas to ensure greater participation of women in decision-making.

With an eye to the more immediate future, attention to the language and rhetoric of textbooks and school curricula will also be fundamental so that educational institutions do not continue to perpetuate the transmission of gender stereotypes. Furthermore, as far as education is concerned, it is at least urgent that the younger generations should be well equipped to consciously orient themselves in the jungle of information offered by the digital world. In this sense, it is crucial that educational institutions pay particular attention to the basic knowledge, the repertoire and the instruments that constitute the essential cornerstone for the development of skills in the broad sense, not only in reference to the instrumental aspects (as instead appears increasingly obvious). The educational holding company should ensure the transmission of values and principles that place at the center the dignity and equality of all human beings. In other words, it is essential that the younger generations experience in school relations marked by respect, equality, acceptance, equanimity, and reciprocity.

Indications for operators

- Promote awareness of women's rights among young people through the sharing of knowledge, experience, and expectations
- Role-Playing Scenarios: Divide participants into pairs. One acts as a girl facing limitations (e.g., not allowed to pursue education), the other acts as a supporter. Girls experience the issue firsthand, while boys see the impact.
- Photo Voice: Provide pictures depicting gender roles (women cooking, men working). Discuss traditional roles, then have participants take photos that challenge those roles (e.g., a man cooking). Reflect on how these images redefine expectations.
- Storytelling Workshop: Invite an elder to share stories of strong women who defied limitations. Discuss the importance of their contributions and how girls can be similarly empowered.

- **Community Survey:** Design a simple survey asking adults about their educational or career aspirations when young. Compare results with younger participants' aspirations. Discuss how societal expectations might differ for girls and boys.
- **Media Analysis:** Analyze advertisements or media portrayals. Discuss how women are represented and the messages conveyed. Encourage participants to create alternative media that promotes gender equality.
- **Debate Club:** Divide the group. One side argues the benefits of traditional gender roles, the other argues for women's rights. This fosters critical thinking and challenges pre-existing notions.
- **Famous Figures:** Research famous women who have made significant contributions. Discuss their achievements and how they overcame challenges. This inspires both girls and boys.
- **"If I Were..." Writing Activity:** Ask participants to write a story from the perspective of a woman facing limitations. Then, rewrite it imagining she had equal opportunities. Discuss the impact of these differences.
- **Community Service Project:** Organize a project that benefits women in the community, such as health education workshops or childcare support. This fosters empathy and a sense of agency for both girls and boys.
- **Creating a "Women's Rights Charter":** Facilitate a group discussion to create a list of principles for gender equality within the participants. This promotes ownership and understanding of women's rights.