



Gender Equality and Antidiscrimination for Roma

MODULE 6

Protection of the girl participation in social and political life through an increased awareness of her needs and potential.

SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

As illustrated in the latest report of the Gender Social Norms Index¹ (2023), the global value of the Gender Inequality Index has not progressed significantly in the past five years. Stereotypes and prejudices against women are still entrenched in the social fabric, hindering their empowerment and participation in various spheres. At the same time, important asymmetries remain in labor remuneration, time devoted to care (i.e., unpaid work), political representation, and access to sexual and reproductive health and health services. The data on gender-based violence unfortunately reflect this condition of substantial inequality, decisively confirming that stereotypes, and the cultural conditioning that follows, are the critical issue to be addressed. The inclusion of women in decision-making processes is not only a matter of equity, it represents a strategic opportunity to draw on diverse knowledge and experience that can lead to more effective solutions in all different areas of policy.

1. FEMALE LEADERSHIP AND RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

The fact that nearly 90 percent of the world's population harbors gender bias results in lower representation of women in politics in the economy and in leadership. This deprives society of their contribution in terms of ideas, strategies, and solutions. For example, it is estimated that in addressing global challenges such as pandemics, climate change, and conflict, a greater presence of women in decision-making roles could lead to diverse and more effective solutions. Women's leadership broadens the range of perspectives considered and leads to more inclusive, and most importantly, more effective policies on the key issues of our time, such as health, environment and energy, and economic development. In addition, the increased focus on the most vulnerable in society and the consideration of interconnected aspects leads them to express more moderate and thoughtful policies in the short and long term.

Especially in areas such as health, environment, and education, there is evidence that women tend to pay more attention to the needs of often neglected segments of the population (women, children, minorities) and promote more balanced and forward-looking policies. Specifically, this is consequent to the fact that women leaders tend to balance short-term and long-term goals, avoiding extreme choices (risk/security, equity/inequity) and favoring a moderate approach². As demonstrated recently during the COVID-19 pandemic (PAG12) this leadership style proved effective by adopting integrated strategies that considered health, education, and economics³.

Globally, women are underrepresented in health care leadership roles, even though they make up most of the health and social care workforce. This is a pool of experience that remains untapped.

Another point of criticism concerns the low or almost non-existent presence of women at negotiating tables even in the most recent conflicts. Globally, most peace processes do not include female mediators or signatories. This, too, translates into fewer opportunities to influence discussions and push for more lasting solutions that contemplate institutional reforms and social recovery plans. In this regard, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) recognizes their crucial role in conflict resolution and their positive impact on the stability of peace processes⁴.

Regarding the European condition, given a general alignment with global-level data, it is noteworthy that Sweden stands out for its high rate of women's participation in the work of EU executive bodies and regional assemblies (47.4 percent according to 2018 data). Factors contributing to this achievement include, in addition to the adoption of gender quotas in electoral lists, work-family balance policies, which include childcare services and flexible parental leave. A goal, that of women's political participation, which Sweden

¹ <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdp-document/gsni202303pdf.pdf>

² <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2026112118>

³ https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/UNDP_Gender_Equality_Strategy_2022-2025_EN_V2.pdf

⁴ <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n00/720/18/pdf/n0072018.pdf?token=weIj3d4NuAoTdd7klr&fe=true>

has achieved, succeeding in putting appropriate gender policies to good use mainly through the strengthening of the welfare system.

So, gender inequality and shrinking welfare systems limit agency, understood as the ability to act on one's own ideas and values, in strategic areas such as women's economic empowerment and political participation.

Of note is the fact that the education gap is almost closed, however, this does not translate into the narrowing of the income gap. As mentioned, women continue to suffer from the social expectations placed on them with respect to childcare and, more generally, in unpaid work, such as household chores and caring for the elderly.

Moreover, it is also true that women are judged more harshly as leaders, which is another factor that discourages their participation.

International conventions, while important legal instruments, are not supported by adequate political will and financial investment from governments; compared to this stagnation, the prospect of achieving gender equality by 2030 seems a daunting challenge.

Moreover, progress toward gender equality can provoke negative reactions that hinder further advances. This is the case with current reactionary movements that, by mobilizing rhetorical strategies from across the political spectrum, attack the rights won by women. This emerging phenomenon is accompanied by the negative consequences of neoliberal policies on women's rights, particularly those belonging to the working classes and ethnic minorities.

Austerity measures introduced with welfare cuts, reduction of social services, low wages, and rising cost of living disproportionately burden women. In this way, the economic crisis pushes to reinforce the traditional role of the family, with women relegated to the role of housewife even more limited in their employment and educational opportunities. Reactionary movements oppose gender studies, feminism and the advances made by women and minorities, identifying them as a threat to the traditional family and social values. To the challenge of gender equality, the reduction of political freedoms globally is also emerging as a decisive obstacle.

Despite international efforts and European regulations, gender inequality thus remains a pervasive reality.

2. EDUCATION AND AWARENESS OF ONE'S RIGHTS

On the one hand, the discourse on women's empowerment is related to the guarantees that enable them to have access to governance and to be equally represented, and this is addressed by international legal instruments. However, a further significant dimension in women's empowerment is that related to the development of their capacities and is closely related to education and gendered social norms.

Gendered educational models are socio-cultural constructs that influence how males and females are educated and socialized. These models, often implicit and uncoded, shape the behavior, expectations and opportunities of individuals based on their gender.

Social norms are unwritten rules that define appropriate and acceptable behavior within a society. They influence our actions in often unconscious ways, shaping our expectations of how we should behave and how others should behave in certain situations.

Socialization to gender norms occurs from early childhood and is transmitted to us by parental attitudes, school environments, and informal places of socialization (friendship context, media, religious institutions). As we grow up, we continue to confront social expectations that reinforce gender norms through sanctioning or rewarding behaviors. In this sense, a woman might adopt a submissive attitude, even if in a position of leadership, to secure more room for action while considering the interplay of social dynamics. This is an example of how a social norm can influence the behavior of even those who do not share it.

UNDP argues that harmful social norms, such as those that perpetuate the subordination of women and the unequal division of labor, underlie many gender inequalities⁵.

Education enables people to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to realize their aspirations. Education aimed at personal development also creates the conditions, at the level of the social fabric and shared norms, for girls to develop their abilities and exercise their substantive freedom. This means empowering young women to choose the life they want, without necessarily having to conform to roles predefined by social gender norms: wife, mother and, essentially, caregiver. This should not be understood as an idealistic position, but rather as the answer to the social problem we experience, as fewer opportunities and limitations to women's rights also hold back economic and social development. These inequalities are transmitted unchanged and fuel intergenerational inequality.

The hyper sexualization and adultization of children, which currently largely characterize family educational styles, is reflected in children's early acquisition of sexist stereotypes and behaviors. It is therefore very important that education on gender-related issues can begin as early as elementary school. Primary prevention begins with early, appropriate, and correct education from an early age. This can help deconstruct the stereotype of masculinity from which the social behaviors that conform to it and their acceptance follow. The complementary aspect is to be able to interfere the gender norms handed down, helping women from an early age to recognize their own strength and potential. In contrast to the generality of educational traditions, which tend to empower girls, from an early age, by assigning them nurturing tasks and reflective and intellectual games and activities that rarely include physical exertion, and instead encouraging children to experience games of competition and struggle that also privilege motor activities.

Gender, as a social construct, crucially influences our experiences, our opportunities, and how we are perceived and treated. It permeates every aspect of life, from the private to the public sphere, and results in inequalities that intersect with other forms of discrimination, such as those based on social class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Analyzing social conditions through a gender lens allows us to unveil the inequalities that affect women and girls, highlighting how these are often a consequence of a patriarchal and discriminatory social structure.

Looking at social conditions without the veil of gender bias allows for positions of better social justice to be won for the benefit of all.

A recent example that perfectly illustrates how a gender- and class-conscious approach to intersectionality has determined access to rights and opportunities was the struggle for reproductive freedom in Latin America.

The movements that supported this challenge highlighted how this issue implicitly intersected with other dimensions of gender-based violence. Because clandestine abortion, which carries sometimes fatal health risks and prohibitive costs, is a form of violence on par with domestic violence, sexual harassment, or the wage gap. Emphasizing the cost of abortion, which makes it risky differentially depending on each person's social and economic position, has allowed the debate to shift from ethical and religious issues to that of equality in rights of access to public health service, suggesting that the right to reproductive freedom is a right that goes beyond the individual sphere, assuming collective relevance in terms of public health, social welfare and economic development. Secondly, the call for the inclusion of sex education in the school curriculum has expanded discussion and reflection on sexuality relationship and affect, representing a further step forward against gender bias. Sex education provides new generations with the tools to learn about their bodies, experience sexuality consciously and responsibly, and build healthy and respectful relationships.

⁵ https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/UNDP_Gender_Equality_Strategy_2022-2025_EN_V2.pdf

The Capability Approach

The Capabilities Approach (CA), developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, represents an innovative paradigm for evaluating social and welfare policies. The approach focuses on the capabilities of individuals—that is, their actual freedoms to choose and achieve what is important to them—rather than simply material well-being. From this perspective it conceives of all the different dimensions of concrete living, such as health, the ability to take care of one's physical integrity, education, equal employment opportunities, political and religious freedoms, which ultimately determine the actual opportunity and freedom of choice and action⁶.

Nussbaum distinguishes between two types of capacities: internal capacities, which are those related to a person's level of development (cultural level, health, morality, understanding of the world) and combined capacities, which concern how these internal capacities can correlate with external conditions and thus have a way of expressing themselves (access to study, health, natural environment, cultural heritage).

Capabilities are defined as "substantive freedoms," that is, as sets of opportunities for action that people can choose and enact. Quality of life and well-being depend on the space of freedom made available to choose and act on one's aptitudes and experiences.

To activate and optimize decision-making, it is necessary for the person to have developed satisfactory capabilities that are feasible and practicable in the context in which he or she lives. To this end, it is essential that the context be supportive and appropriate, enabling personal free choice. In this sense, the capability approach shifts the focus from the concept of development as the sum of goods to the concept of capability, understood as real freedom to do and be. Quality of life is measured by the concrete opportunity's individuals have to choose among different lifestyles, realizing their human wholeness. This focus on the specificity of people recognizes the importance of environment and personal characteristics in converting resources into well-being. Not everyone starts from the same point, and policies to improve the situation of a particular disadvantaged person or group must take these factors into account. Finally, this approach recognizes individuals' freedom of choice and the diversity of their goals.

Not only is it important to have the ability to achieve a good level of well-being, but also to have the ability to pursue what one considers meaningful, even if it involves sacrifice. The basic elements for acquiring skills are education and work. Without them, it is not possible for a person to break free from a condition of dependence and vulnerability, let alone gain experience and become aware of his or her abilities.

Women often live in conditions that limit their opportunities, so they cannot aspire to something they do not know⁷.

Changing education, especially women's education, is therefore crucial. Equally important is to recognize that this task cannot be left exclusively to educational institutions; NGOs can play a more immediate role in this direction by creating networks of supportive relationships and offering alternative examples of educational and relational styles, and by making women aware not only of their capabilities but also of their rights. Above all, welfare policies can achieve significant results in this regard, provided, of course, that economic investment is increased⁸.

Regarding the applications of CA with special attention to the status of women, we cite two particularly significant examples. The first is the intervention on childcare services in Scandinavian countries. The provision of high-quality services at affordable prices and the redistribution of paid parental leave to fathers

⁶ Nussbaum, M. 2000, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Nussbaum, M. (Editor) , *Professor of Law and Ethics , University of Chicago* Sen, Amartya (Editor) , *Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, The Quality of Life*, Print ISBN 0198287976, 1993

⁸ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment>

as well as mothers has improved the reconciliation of women's work and family life by increasing the female employment rate⁹.

Another example of the application of CA is that of microcredit programs for women in India to start businesses. In this case, women's increased control over economic resources was reflected in increased autonomy in decision-making, with a direct impact on their ability to negotiate within the family and community. This was a tangible improvement in the living conditions of women and their families¹⁰.

In both cases the change the increase in women's social role was the direct result of their empowerment.

These examples demonstrate how in empowerment processes it is essential and necessary to accompany programs of education and appropriate education with concrete support interventions at the level of economic and/or service provision. This combination can enable people, and in particular women from disadvantaged groups, to broaden their possibilities of choice and action, fostering their personal fulfillment. So, regarding the condition of young women, the most effective strategies for promoting their real empowerment are those that consider both aspects: removal of structural barriers and access to economic resources.

2. Participation in community and political life

The participation of girls from disadvantaged groups in community and political life is crucial, and it is essential that they be able to put forward and field their own expectations and solutions and thus participate actively in political life. Moreover, considering that they generally cannot do so in their home group, it is even more essential to be able to ensure that young women from disadvantages groups can express their public potential. Promoting public engagement of Roma girls at the small community level would establish a virtuous circle, influencing decision-making at the local level and bringing to the agenda those issues, related to social and family issues, that have the greatest impact on their daily life experience. Giving the youngest girls a voice is also crucial for thematizing and making visible spaces of demand that are still unexpressed.

Their participation in local community management can therefore lead to several positive cascading effects. First, there would be a redistribution of land development priorities, with a greater focus on socially oriented plans and projects. This would result in the enhancement and adequate funding of existing social programs to counter discrimination. Think, for example, of awareness-raising initiatives to overcome social stigma or specific support services. But the contribution does not end in direct action. Women from disadvantaged groups, if adequately represented, can put in place various advocacy mechanisms. Consider the establishment of local councilor associations that specifically address the rights of these women, or the appointment of representatives from disadvantaged groups to community executive bodies. At the programmatic level, this could translate into social programs at the local level that have a focus on the most vulnerable groups in the territories. Finally, it would involve implementing and disseminating good practices that have already proven their effectiveness in protecting the rights of women from disadvantaged backgrounds¹¹.

We have already mentioned (see section 3) the legislative tools that can facilitate this process, and improve opportunities for women's representation, such as gender quotas in local elections, and compliance with regulations to counter sexism and discrimination. However, it is important to remember the other elements

⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/affordable-quality-childcare-inaccessible-many-worlds-wealthiest-countries-unicef>

¹⁰ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/217381468313758622/pdf/351370REV0GenderGuidelinesOSANS.pdf>

¹¹ Alcuni esempi virtuosi di donne che, grazie al loro impegno sono riuscite ad innescare cambiamenti significativi impattando la comunità locale, sono documentati in: EU Award for Roma Integration in the Western Balkans and Turkey, © European Union, 2019.

https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/4c1aa71c-8954-4305-8c4f-ea8435140d84_en?filename=eu_award_for_roma_integration_2019_projects.pdf

that play a decisive role in promoting or not promoting women's active participation in political life. Briefly, they can be summarized as: the presence of favorable conditions at the social level; the presence of widespread prejudice, (intolerance, discrimination, and social exclusion) against women, and especially those belonging to more disadvantaged groups; lack of awareness of opportunities for political participation; and difficulties in reconciling family and political commitments. In addition, the low presence of other women in leadership positions may be an additional deterrent to pursuing this career.

Women who belong to disadvantaged groups (low educational level, low income or unemployment, rural women, women with disabilities, in forced or early marriages, members of ethnic/religious minorities, refugees, internally displaced persons, HIV-positive, drug addicts, female prisoners, etc.) and who suffer from forms of intersectional discrimination, in addition to having fewer opportunities, are even less motivated to participate in political and public processes. In this case, we can consider specific elements to increase their participation. Encouraging them to take leadership roles in the community requires a diverse approach that considers both social barriers and practical tools. First, their direct involvement in self-governing bodies and/or public engagement in the work of local authorities. Essentially, their participation should be fostered at the local level, in the communities where they live¹².

Measures that can further foster young women's participation relate more specifically to the psychological and emotional, political, and legal, interpersonal, and managerial aspects of leadership and can be the subject of specific training. First, it is essential to work on the psychological and emotional aspect so that they gain awareness of their potential and their ability to influence their own lives, families, and communities. In this regard, it is important to strengthen their self-esteem, determination, and self-confidence, providing them with the tools to find their own motivation and better manage their emotions and behaviors. A powerful motivating factor could be the knowledge of women leaders who share their experience.

Second, training should focus on knowledge of human rights, their exercise, and legal mechanisms for their protection, especially in cases of discrimination and sexism. It is essential to familiarize young women with the functioning of local self-government bodies, decision-making processes at the regional level, and for them to be informed about existing public participation tools. Creating concrete community development projects can also encourage them to take an active part in decision-making processes and political life.

Finally, interpersonal, and managerial skills training. This includes the acquisition of the skills of critical and analytical thinking, effective communication and teamwork management, practical notions on the organization and democratic management of women's groups and on networking with other local entities. The training should also include the basics of planning and presenting projects at the local level, to equip participants with the tools they need to implement concrete actions and improve their community¹³.

3. Promoting alternative behaviors

Attitudes, social relationships, and power dynamics are directly influenced by gender social norms. As we mentioned, the persistence of these norms, which undervalue women's capabilities and rights, effectively undermines the effects of removing barriers to political appointments. Stereotypes remain the same and are evident even at the level of language. For example, in the media, women in leadership positions are often represented in ways that denote a reductionist idea of their competence. This happens, for instance, by shifting the focus to elements related to their private and family life (mother of, wife of), or simply by identifying them by their first name rather than their surname.

Regarding career choices, it is much more difficult for women to break free from the professional and life paths already decided by the family. Supporting specific vocational training programs for women in male-dominated sectors to help them find qualified work can be an opportunity rich in developments.

¹² <https://rm.coe.int/participation-young-women-en/1680a01873>

¹³ Per approfondire il tema guarda: <https://rm.coe.int/participation-young-women-en/1680a01873>

Specifically for our project, it's important to highlight that it involves both girls and boys, fostering their participation in all phases of creating the web radio. This involvement at different stages, from ideation to implementation, to evaluation of the work done, creates a sense of shared ownership. In this way, the project itself can become an expression of the community's needs and capabilities, including diverse perspectives, and thus creating content that responds to the interests and needs of the entire community. Consequently, its impact will be greater in the long term.

The educational and empowerment journey during the activities should be able to connect with the untapped potentials of the young participants, revealing more clearly the inequalities present in their community. Their agency could be encouraged through tasks and activities usually entrusted to boys and that could also increase their social visibility. This would help to interrupt the spiral through which harmful social norms self-reinforce, as the more girls are excluded from certain areas of action, the more the idea is strengthened that they are not suitable for those specific tasks, further justifying their exclusion.

4. Direction for practitioners

During communal activities, practitioners can work on several levels, first by fostering the creation of a climate of communicative exchange and sharing among the girls with each other and with the boys. It is important for the purpose of strengthening their agency that they can break through isolation and cultivate the social fabric of exchange and mutual trust. To this end, providing for small group training (6 max 10 participants) will be able to foster an informal communication style with the operators as well. Later in specific training sessions, the groups can be expanded.

Specific directions with respect to the areas.

(a) Training:

- Workshops on human rights, mechanisms of protection from discrimination and sexism, functioning of local self-government bodies and public participation tools.
- Provide girls with information on their rights and opportunities available to them.
- provide training in leadership and political participation skills.
- provide examples of female role models: meetings with successful women leaders who share their experiences to motivate girls.

(b) Capacity building:

- training that develops self-awareness of one's potential and teaches techniques for managing self-esteem, motivation, and determination.
- courses on critical thinking, effective communication, teamwork, and project management.
- training on democratic management of women's groups and networking with other associations.
- creating safe and inclusive spaces where girls can meet and discuss.
- offer support and mentorship to girls who wish to take on leadership roles.
- promote the creation of support networks among girls.

(c) Active Involvement:

- design and implement community-based initiatives that enable girls to practice the skills they have learned (including through the creation of radio podcasts);
- highlight the success stories of girls participating in programs, creating role models for others.
- encourage girls to participate in political and social activities in the most immediate context.
- support the candidacy of girls for elected office.
- ensure girls' representation in decisions that affect them.