

# Romani Peoples' Resistance to Mainstream Schooling: A Focus on Romani Woman and Girls' Education and the Educational Policies, Barriers, and Practices in Greece

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*The Romani (or Roma) people are, perhaps, the oldest and most discriminated against ethnic minority group in Eastern Europe. In particular, Romani women and girls have been described by the UN Women, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Office of High Commission of Human Rights (OHCHR) as "one of the most disempowered groups in Europe." This paper provides an exploratory investigation of Romani women's and girls' lack of educational attainment as it looks at some of the policy barriers, practices and the nature of Roma peoples' reluctance to participate in mainstream public schooling in Greek society. There is an urgent need for effective and focused policies that take into account social inclusion, equality, and non-discrimination of Romani women and girls. However, Romani women are ultimately silenced by the continued lack of quantitative and qualitative data, research and statistics, making them Europe's most invisible minority.*

*De tous les groupes minoritaires de l'Europe orientale, les Roms sont peut-être le peuple le plus exposé aux discriminations. L'ONU Femmes, le Programme des Nations unies pour le développement et le Haut-Commissariat des Nations Unies aux droits de l'homme ont notamment décrit les femmes et les filles roms comme « l'un des groupes les moins émancipés de l'Europe ». Cet article présente une étude exploratoire du faible niveau de scolarité des femmes et des filles roms en évoquant quelques obstacles sur le plan politique, certaines pratiques et la nature de la réticence de la part des Roms à s'intégrer dans le système éducatif public en Grèce. Il existe un besoin urgent pour des politiques efficaces, bien ciblées et qui tiennent compte de l'inclusion sociale, l'égalité et la non-discrimination envers les femmes et les filles roms. Pourtant et ultimement, les femmes roms sont réduites au silence par l'absence continue de données quantitatives et qualitatives, de recherche et de statistiques, ce qui fait d'elles la minorité européenne la moins visible.*

## Introduction

The Romani (or Roma—used interchangeably in this paper) culture and the Romani ways of “being” or Romani ontology (the culturally unique philosophy of understanding the world and ways of being, becoming, and existing), have been of great interest to me, since I am of Romani

ancestry ( $\frac{1}{4}$  “Gypsy blood”) that goes back generations on my fraternal grandmother’s side. In the interest of reflexive scholarship, I begin my analysis by locating myself as a researcher of Romani ancestry. My family had steadfastly managed to keep their Romani or “Gypsy<sup>1</sup> identity” and the narrative that followed, under wraps, and never openly spoke about it. I imagine this is so because my grandmother and her family had been assimilated and acculturated into mainstream Greek society, after working as child servants in prominent Greek family households at a fairly young age, following the untimely death of their parents. They, in turn, abandoned (for the most part) their Romani identity and became “socially adjusted” Gypsies. Early on, and throughout my own Greek upbringing, I learned that Greek society harbours deep antipathy and an overwhelmingly negative social stigma toward Romani people—referring to them as “Anthiganoi” (αθηγγανοί) for administrative purposes but most often, and pejoratively of course, as “Gyftoi” or “Yiftoi” (γύφτοι). In fact, the term *Roma* was not commonly used in Greece until very recently (e.g., Greek Helsinki Monitor [GHM], 2003) and often means, or translates, to “man” or “husband.” My Roma family members assimilated into the dominant Greek cultural paradigm and subsequently reaped the benefits and advantages of being “insiders,” rather than “outsiders” of the structure of Greek society and the highly rigid, culturally homogeneous Greek education system, holding on to but mere telltale fragments of their “Gypsiness.” Some of these quasi-Gypsy identity fragments were clearly revealed in my grandmother’s Asiatic features; namely, her tawny complexion, her deep black eyes and black hair, her prominent cheek bones and slightly projecting lower jaw, complemented by the more subtle reminders of her Gypsiness revealed in a word or two that was intertwined, but only faintly so in her Greek vocabulary, reminiscent of a language once spoken, but necessarily forgotten.

In spite of the powerful stigma associated with being Gypsy, especially within the European Union (EU), I have always been ineffably drawn to my Gypsy roots and have always had a special connection to the Romani people; to their music (and more generally to their ways of being/τρόπος); to their sense of place (topos/τόπος—the sense belonging in the world), to how they understand the sense of space (geographic consciousness); to their nomadic tradition and unconventional ways of being, exemplified in their travelling which is often misconstrued as leisure, rather than a way of life, or a way of being. In other words, what I understand as Roma ontology encompasses Roma peoples’ distinct ways of knowing, and of course, the ways by which they develop a sense of awareness and sense of self with relation to others, within and outside their community. Part of understanding Roma ontology is to gain a stronger sense of their century-old resistance to assimilation. With no territory and government of their own, the Romani people are considered a permanently liminal people, monstrous others, pariahs and, therefore, racially, undesirable. As a result, many Romani people, particularly Romani women, respond to dominant cultural mores through isolation and cultural resistance. Their marginality, however, has not only rendered them readily identifiable, but has enabled them to maintain their very unique identity (Drobizheva, Gottemoeller, & McArdle Kelleher, 2015).

In this paper, I aim to make the plight of Romani women more visible and provide an overview of the complexity of identity issues for Roma people and particularly Roma females in the mainstream Greek education system, the resistances they experience—the kind that extend to educational policies and practices (and lack thereof)—as well as the resistances that they may have (and rightfully so) toward the Greek education system and integrating and assimilating into Greek society, in general. Alternately, it is important to call attention to the observable resistances of the dominant cultural contexts to recognize Roma women’s rights, since violations

of the rights of Roma women (but also women's rights in general) occur most often at the local level where resistance to comply with such international standards remains stronger (Ceneda, 2002). My intent, as such, is to shed some light on Romani women's and girls' lack of educational attainment and their resistance or outright refusal to partake in mainstream public schooling in Greek society. I draw from EU policies, agency documents, and reports such as the "Gypsy and Traveller Education: Engaging Gypsy and Traveller Families" (2015) the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), the National Social Reports (NRP), the Emergency Care Research Institute (ECRI), the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM), and the 2011 European Council's (EC) study, prepared by Vassiliki Antonopoulou, in addition to educational and social control policies that rather than seeking to ameliorate Roma pupils' inclusion into Greek state schools, actually tend to reject them.

### **The Context**

Irrespective of where they live today, Romani people are considered by many to be non-citizens as they hold no passports, and arguably, possess no homeland. That view suggests the Romani do not belong to a particular economic area where they pay taxes and contribute to the area or state they occupy. Such discourses are those that dominate or shape public perceptions, and thus, public opinion. Current policies (migration, educational, social, healthcare, etc.) continue to violate the basic human rights of the Romani people, while development and implementation of sound, comprehensive (state-driven) policies that take minorities such as the Romani into consideration are nearly absent—at least within the greater Greek context. Moreover, fairly recent, exclusionary policy developments—made popular by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy—aimed at deporting Romani people to south-eastern Europe are “advancing irresistibly” (Schwarz, 2010, para. 5).

European leaders speak ominously of the “Roma Problem,” trying to limit migration or drive them to the borders in hopes of being rid of what the increasingly hostile public deems as criminal beings with “criminal tendencies” (Fontanella-Khan, 2014, para. 2). Following a controversial and traumatic deportation of Roma schoolgirl, Leonarda Dibrani, in France in October 2013, Manuel Valls, then the country's Socialist Interior Minister, said “The majority [of Roma] should be delivered back to the borders. We are not here to welcome these people” (as cited in Younge, 2013, para. 7). Valls has previously stated that the Roma represent a “clear confrontation” with the French way of life and should “go home” (as cited in Younge, 2013, para. 6). But where is home? And what does home actually mean for Roma people? With this kind of approach and similar approaches throughout the EU toward Roma people, the plight of ameliorating any inequalities, and mostly gender inequalities, becomes nearly impossible.

Romani children, like their parents, are *de facto* excluded on account of their social disadvantages, while their social exclusion and their exclusion from schooling is often linked to the lack of birth registration and identity documents, to low participation in early childhood education and care as well as higher education, and finally, to elevated school drop-out rates (European Commission, 2011a). As such, segregation is a serious barrier preventing access to quality education (EU, 2013). There are several studies that examine some of the underlying reasons for school failure of Romani children (e.g., Đigić, 2008; Friedman, Gallová Kriglerová, Kubánová, & Slosiarik, 2009; Olivier, 2009; Trimikliniotis & Demetriou, 2009), and thus failure to successfully integrate into mainstream society. Schooling, on the other hand, is often considered to be an instrument by which acculturation, integration and/or assimilation might

be expedited; in fact, it seems that mainstream schooling has always been more about negotiating (new) identities, becomings perhaps, by submitting to dominant structures and less, if at all, about preserving let alone celebrating identities that do not, cannot, or will not fit the mainstream mould.

### **Romani Women in Greece**

The Romani people are the oldest and most discriminated against ethnic minority group in both Eastern and Western Europe according to Dimitrina Petrova (2006), executive director of the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) in Budapest. In particular, Romani women and girls have been described by the United Nations (UN), the Office of High Commission of Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and other minority rights groups and organizations as one of the most disempowered groups in Europe (UN Women, UNDP, OHCHR, 2014). While there appears to be a strong sense of global commitment to the attainment of universal education for girls—insofar as the discourses specifically suggest in the National Strategy Framework for the Roma (European Commission, 2011b), or in the Human Rights Education Action Plan initiated by the Greek Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs Directorate of International Relations in Education—such attainments have been difficult to achieve because numerous obstacles stand in the way, particularly for Roma girls and Roma women in Greece (Antonopoulou, 2011). Romani women and girls, like other marginalized populations (immigrant students and students with physical disabilities, for example) in Greece are

often excluded from consultation and decision-making processes on legislation, policies and programmes, including those that are specifically designed to address their situation. This contributes to a lack of or a limited perspective when it comes to Romani women and girls place in policies on gender and/or social inclusion which further hinders Romani women's (equal) access to resources and their full participation in all spheres of public and private life. (Phenjalipe, 2014, p. 1)

Roma children, and particularly female Roma students in schools, are a highly vulnerable group as they confront triple exclusion: that of being a child, a Roma, and a female. In its annual reports, the Council of Europe (CoE) has proclaimed that the challenges facing Roma women and girls in the areas of education, employment, health care and access in public spaces are insurmountable. Yet, no European government has been successful in protecting the human rights of the members of this minority group (European Commission, 2012), particularly, its female members who are left vulnerable and defenceless not only within their Roma communities, but as citizens in countries they are seen as occupying, and as human beings with rights.<sup>2</sup> Roma women, in particular, are faced with deep social and gender inequalities, and are confronted by complex, multidimensional forms of discrimination, violence and exclusion. From forced and coercive sterilization and domestic violence, to early marriage, and human trafficking, Romani women are often victims of extreme violence, human rights violations and abuses, both on their emotional and physical integrity that have been supported by policy-makers and national structures (European Commission, 2012). Due to the nature of this paper—that focuses mainly on Romani girls' educational attainments and women in the Greek context—I limit my investigation to literature that mainly focuses on policy and on the multiple discrimination issues that affect Romani people and, to a greater extent, Romani females in the

Greek context. An overview of the literature on Romani women and girls, however, reveals the forlorn conclusion that any gender related research is dramatically absent from the integrated policies for Roma (Antonopoulou, 2011). Specifically, “lack of data, which are broken down by sex and ethnic group and previous research, make it difficult to measure, accurately, to what extent Roma women have access to services such as education, employment, housing, health-care” (CoE, 2011, p. 5).

In 2011, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) published a “Study on the situation for Roma women and men in the EU” in eleven member States (Greece included) that sheds some light on Roma gender differences by presenting a gender-focused report. Some of the general findings specifically relating to Roma women in Greece reveal that, on average, the situation of Roma women in core areas of social life, namely education, employment, housing and health is worse than that of men (as cited in Phenjalipe, 2014). The lack of focused policies on the situation of Romani women and girls is also reflected in and perpetuated by a lack of quantitative and qualitative data, research, and statistics, which ultimately silences Romani women, making them an invisible minority. Moreover, the greater lack of care for Romani people has made this investigation a very difficult one to undertake, both at a practical level, but also, at an emotional one because it affirms and reaffirms the lack of care for and animosity toward them. At this time, Romani women in Greece are the silent actors of the struggle both in their communities and outside to access very basic Human Rights (CoE, 2011). In addition, Romaphobic discourses manifest themselves and are indeed sustained by “institutions, attitudes and practices which conspire to present Roma people as criminal, deviant, parasites who are not to be trusted because ‘they are not like us’” (McGarry, 2013, para. 4). Indeed, Roma women in particular, face multiple forms of discrimination linked to their “condition” (and double exclusion) both as women and as Roma, reflected in high illiteracy rates, few employment opportunities, poor physical and psychological health, and vulnerability to domestic violence.

Today, Roma people in Greece, as in most other EU countries, continue to face tremendous social and racial prejudice, and high degrees of intolerance and hostile behaviour, as the majority population perceives them as a “useless burden” and considers Romani culture and ontology as an impediment to what is deemed successful social integration. At the same time, and due to this intolerance, many Roma people do not wish to become part of the mainstream and fight to keep their Gypsy “borderless” identity—and who could blame them since they are not liked, let alone protected by the state (at least the Greek state, where priorities of financial survival have trumped all other human interests, at time of writing [summer, 2015]) and hated by the people. Indeed, the Roma, in a sense, epitomize “Borderless” Europe, for as Engelen and Van Heuckelom (2014) assert “[their] culture and history transcends national boundaries, even while they remain marginalized within the nation in which they reside” (p. 9). By resisting mainstream education and the perceived danger it imposes to their culture, Roma people are able to sustain and reaffirm their identity and uphold their nomadic ways. Roma peoples’ resistances mainly emerge from century-old, long-standing patterns of discrimination and rejection by dominant cultural groups. Consequently, many Roma parents and children outright reject the dominant education system, deeming it as a hostile learning environment when compared to the security found in their specific Roma community, which they see as “insulation from any outsider’s prying gaze” (Ang, Sielicka, & van Kan, 2006, para. 33). The same resistance, nevertheless, has opened the path for Roma-bashing, violent attacks, even legal hindrances to Roma peoples’ traditional nomadic lifestyle. On the other hand, their exclusion

from public schooling is reinforced, and of course, reproduced by the (constant and continuing) inability (as will be established further in this paper) of the Greek state, and therefore, the Greek (state-run) education system to recognize and possibly make an effort to accommodate Roma ways.

My doctoral research (Macris, 2014) reaffirms that it has increasingly become a social necessity, if not a matter of urgent moral concern in Greek society, to address the educational needs of marginalized youth—Roma students being amongst the groups who are most marginalized; who are continuously isolated from public as well as educational policy discourse in Greece. As such, improving the educational experience of marginalized students, like the Roma, should be (but has not been for Greece) a top policy priority for countries with Roma populations. Prioritizing the education of marginalized student groups may likely yield potential benefits not only for the marginalized and disenfranchised students and youth in Greek society, but for native Greeks; for greater Greek society—a society that seems not to be benefiting from the diversity of peoples and their diverse ways of thinking and being, at this time. Although my study focused on investigating immigrant students' opportunities (or lack thereof) for self-invention and self-efficacy in Greek state schools, it has yielded many insights that have served as a catalyst to inform and conscientize researchers, educators, policy makers to all marginalized children and youth, who continue to struggle in one of the most exclusionary systems of public education imaginable.

### **The Present Greek Context**

At present, there is no official policy framework or governance arrangement in Greece for tackling Roma poverty and social exclusion. A new policy framework and strategy for the inclusion of Roma is said to be under preparation, as stated in *The Greek National Reform Programme 2011-2014* (but there is nothing tangible at this time). The National Social Reports (NRP) makes only a short reference to the Roma population and it does not contain any analysis or specific measures aiming at the alleviation of poverty and social exclusion of Roma. In this respect, the Greek state seems not to be ready, yet (not even close), to offer a decisive solution to the long lasting problems of the country's Roma population. Of course, there was hope in the horizon with the newly elected Left-wing SYRIZA government early in 2015. However, there is a need for a real commitment for addressing the serious problems facing the Roma people in Greece, which I find is not present as Roma people are not, by any means, a priority. Prioritizing would demand setting concrete goals and taking specific actions, which would necessarily be accompanied by budgetary allocations, among other things. In any case, as Ziomas, Bouzas, and Spyropoulou (2011) insist,

special attention and priority should be given to Roma adults' and minors' education and training with particular focus on women and girls, on housing conditions, on health issues, on employment and on the ending of the phenomenon of 'undocumented Roma'. (p. 3)

Indeed, the concept "undocumented" Roma presents a serious problem in Greece (as it does for undocumented immigrants who are referred to as illegals, and are left with, few, if any rights). The specific actions to be taken in this regard, should be an inseparable part of a well elaborated and clear strategy offering an integrated solution to the long-lasting multidimensional problems faced by Roma people in Greece (Ziomas et al., 2011). Thus far, in

the current Greek polity, the Greek Roma have some access to a more official identity: that of being “Greek Roma,” constructed from elements of Greek citizenship and Roma peoples’ Rom heritage. Of course this identity is less valued by the dominant Greek non-Rom society.

### **Education and Educational Policy Barriers in Greece**

Greece does not apply the concept of “minority” to Roma (Kostadinova, 2011); in contrast, the Roma in Greece are considered to belong to “vulnerable social groups” (Dragonas, 2012). Most Roma use their community language, *Romani* (Nikolaou, 2009), and mainly follow different cultural traditions compared to those of the Greek community. While the Roma in Greece are not a homogeneous group, to an extent, patriarchal attitudes and traditional gendered regimes are still evident in most cases (Chatzisavvidis, 2007). In Greek society, state education programmes have targeted Roma’s schooling for the last two decades (I would say at a superficial level). The effectiveness of educational provision for the Roma has been in doubt because many problems (e.g. high dropouts and lower levels of performance compared to non-Roma pupils/peers) are still reported. However, it could be argued that the governmental tactics at play are generally “compensatory” in style and seek to “immerse” the Roma in Greek language and Greek Orthodox values in order to foster their Greek identity and promote social inclusion (e.g., Gkofa, 2014). Segregation of Romani children in education is quite prevalent and takes various forms: mainly segregation into special education or segregation within mainstream education into ethnically separated classes and/or schools. In the last three years a series of significant decisions by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) set standards for non-discrimination in education with a special focus on Romani children (ERRC, 2010). The ECtHR confirmed that the level of education provided to Roma children is, in fact, inferior. Dimitris Zachos (2012) extensively discusses the conditions Roma pupils face within the Greek educational system. He presents a critical approach in Romani Studies by employing institutional racism as a lens, accompanied by official documents and secondary data, to provide a concise analysis of the educational policy of the Greek state towards Roma pupils.

A serious obstacle Zachos has found that interfered with the educational integration of the Roma residents of Flampouro (a village located in Florina Prefecture—northern Greece), for instance, had to do with the school curriculum and the educational practices which were based (as they continue to be today) on the dominant cultural values and needs of the middle and upper classes (Cornell, 1993; Freire, as cited in Zachos, 2012, p. 273); thus, ethnically or culturally different students in this Greek state school were asked to adapt to its environment without having any kind of support—that is, without being asked to participate in some compensatory education programmes, to enter adaptational reception classes, literacy programmes, or to receive some kind of help from organizations and volunteers for language learning (Zachos, 2012). Another very important obstacle that did not allow Roma students to easily integrate in the Greek educational system was their mother tongue, which was different from the official (Greek) language of the school. It is often the case in more ethnically homogeneous societies like Greece, the desire to achieve homogenization of their citizens by way of “lingual genocide”; “in essence, policies against minority languages which are implemented through prohibition of the use of different languages and, more indirectly, through ideological and structural measures” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998, p. 13). Zachos (2014) concludes that Roma pupils are victims of institutional racism, both because they are members of a distinctive cultural group and because their schools are usually the poorest in the areas. Additionally, the

*Balamo* (what the Roma refer to the non-Roma Greeks in the area), with the tolerance and assistance of local politicians and educational administrative supervisors, have removed their children from the particular school, creating a de facto segregation of the Roma pupils.

A Roma education program that was created based on the concepts developed by the University of Ioannina expounded on the document “Educational Interventions and Social Marginality: The case of Greek Roma” (in 1996) and was founded on the premise that the Roma constitute a social group, rather than an ethnic or cultural minority (GHM, 2003, para. 6.3). Specifically, as a rule, the Roma share a common ethnic identity with the rest of Greek citizens, while the word “Roma” is merely used to refer to a “secondary cultural identity of the person constituting the Greek Roma group” (University of Ioannina, as cited in ERRC & GHM, 2003, p. 165). As was established in my own research and corroborated in this report—“Cleaning Operations: Excluding Roma in Greece (ERRC & GHM, 2003)—the (former) Greek government had made no attempt to mask that its programs for the education of children from minority groups was assimilative in nature; in other words, education programs were designed to assimilate minority students into majority Greek culture (2003). Even though in 1996 Greece adopted an intercultural education approach for meeting the needs of groups with social, cultural and religious particularities, the programs were limited only to repatriated ethnic Greek children or children of immigrants in Greece (and as far as the kind of immigrants in Greece goes, also depends on the desirability of the immigrant based on their cultural, ethnic and religious background. Thus, Roma children have not benefitted from intercultural programs supported by EU agencies, per se. Schools in Greece confirm their inability as institutions to include or to be open to diversity and diverse populations. This inability continues to marginalize Roma pupils, particularly girls (e.g., Steering Committee for Equality between Women and Men [CDEG], 2011), despite “good intentions” and “personal initiatives” of individual schools and teachers.

In 2009, in its third report on Greece, the Emergency Care Research Institute (ECRI) noted with concern that Roma remain at a great disadvantage with regard to education (Council of Europe [CoE], 2009). There are numerous cases of schools that refuse to register Roma children for attendance, in some instances due to pressure by some non-Roma parents. ECRI is concerned that there are also cases of Roma children being separated from other children within the same school or in the vicinity thereof. The absence of disaggregated data on the situation of Roma pupils makes any in-depth assessment of their situation and the ability to devise specific programmes targeting this group difficult (EC, 2014, p. 19). The Greek Ombudsman has led various investigations into the segregation or lack of access of Romani children to education. Greece, however, continues to fail in securing access to desegregated, inclusive education for all pupils (EC, 2014, p. 19). My study (conducted in 2012/2013) on immigrant students confirmed through informal discussions with friends in Greece who have school age children, as well as from the participants in this study, that it is common for native Greek parents to often choose to enroll their children in schools where there are lower numbers of immigrant student populations (Macris, 2014). School principals shared that they often avoid registering immigrant students in their schools as to circumvent stigmatization of having “too many” immigrant students—which may deter parents from enrolling their children in schools with higher immigrant student populations. The stigma and discrimination appears to be greater when it comes to Roma students enrolling into mainstream schools public schools.

The Sampanis Case (2005/2006) provides an excellent example of Roma children being separated from other children within the same school or in the vicinity thereof, in Greece. In this

case, local school authorities in Aspropyrgos, Attica, refused to enrol their children in primary school and instead placed them in a segregated Roma-only annex five kilometres from the school following protests by non-Romani parents against including them in the main school. The Court sanctioned the Greek State for failing to enrol Romani children in school during the 2004/05 school year. It also found that the segregation of Romani children into the annex was the product of a system of assessment that took into account ethnicity when placing children into special preparatory classes and that a more legitimate method for assessing children with educational challenges was necessary (ERRC, 2011).

Another example from the Roma perspective (e.g., Ringold, Orenstein, & Wilkens, 2005, p. 105) reveals that Roma from Timioara, Romania resisted sending children to school due to fears of discrimination and maltreatment of their children. Roma in Bulgaria expressed similar fears. A Roma parent expressed: “[other kids] bully my kids and [teachers] are not nice to them, they are not allowed to speak Romani and they learn nothing about our ways, this is not the way I want to raise my children” (Dimova, as cited in Rostas & Kostka, 2014, p. 276). Only in considering these points of view can we better understand the reluctance and skepticism of some Romani parents to motivate their children to attend school. However, the desegregation initiatives undertaken in Central Eastern European countries have largely ignored Roma expectations, concerns and interests. While resisting mainstream education and the danger it imposes to their culture, Roma people reaffirm their identity, but their exclusion is reinforced.

### **Roma Female Education**

As one could surmise from the review of policies and practices above, any negotiation with regard to access to education between traditional Roma communities and the Greek state are virtually non-existent. A UN report details the multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination faced by Roma women stating that:

As a member of the Romani population, she (the Roma woman) has few advocates and is the target of constant hostility. She is marginalized within her community because of her minority status and within her family because of her gender. (United Nations Department of Public Information, as cited in Illisei, 2013, p. 67)

And while attempting to raise Roma women’s level of education has been deemed a key instrument to combat social exclusion and create social and economic growth, it is perhaps disheartening, if not nearly impossible (it seems) for Romani women to break down the barriers and break out of the vicious cycle of poverty that in every step hinders their capacity to become a part of the system (if they so wish to) or even try to somewhat benefit from it. Roma women are among the social groups most vulnerable to poverty, and while studies indicate that the risk of extreme poverty could be decreased by raising the educational attainment of Roma women to a comparable level as the one achieved by the majority society, it seems that the obstacles facing Roma girls are insurmountable.

Roma women experience gender based discrimination not only in society but also internally within their communities. In the CoE’s (2011) “Invisible lives—Roma women in Greece: Study on combating the isolation of Roma women and girls and promoting their empowerment,” Antonopoulou confirms that girls and boys are treated differently within Roma families and communities. As a general rule, girls are usually confined in the house and are not expected to

go to school or to seek employment. Subordination laconically encapsulates the gender relations in the Roma community (CoE, 2011). In one of Antonopoulou's interviews, a Roma woman claims that [their lives] are reduced to "biological reproduction and care of our children and the family" (CoE, 2011, p. 18). From Antonopoulou's findings, it is quite evident that Roma traditional custom law does not recognize equality between the two sexes.

In school environments, triple discrimination—being a female, a Roma, and a child—of female students increases the risk of peer violence against them, but also increases the risk of violence by school staff (Antonopoulou, 2011). Triple discrimination, notes Hrabanova (2011), is a rather sensitive, invisible, and highly misunderstood issue, much like Betty Friedan's "problem without a name" as described in her book *Feminine Mystique* about women in the 1950s that shows women's lack of self-fulfillment and identity, shaped by an ideology of women seen only as wives and mothers. It thus becomes challenging for Romani women who are still dominated by males within their communities, threatened by increasing violence from the dominant society, and are female in what can be seen as traditional Romani communities (Hrabanova, 2011). Abuse or the risk of abuse of Roma girls in schools is another reason for early drop out at the primary school level, in Greece, which often perpetuates the "vicious circle of poverty" (p. 30). It is difficult to estimate how many Roma children, particularly girls, never enrol in school, and how many drop out, as official data are not available, claims Antonopoulou (2011). According to estimates, only 10% of the Roma girls finish their primary education, even though the girls achieve better results in the few years they are attending school, in comparison to boys. The overarching theme in Roma communities is that "girls do not need education" (CoE, 2011, p. 30). There is, of course, a direct link between external factors such as substandard housing conditions, child labour, racism, segregated schools and female school attendance. Early marriage amongst Roma girls is another, and very serious, contributing factor to why Roma girls stop attending, or do not attend school at all. The CoE (2011) maintains that no policy action has been implemented to reduce early marriage amongst Roma girls, and its impact, while no measures have been taken to ensure the respect of the rights of those already married. It is important to note, however, that issue of early marriage is tricky for scholars and policy-makers, as many within the Romani community defend the practice as a cultural one and outsiders condemning the practice might be seen as being culturally insensitive with assimilation goals. This double-edged sword underscores the necessity of community consultation in any policy-making processes the Greek government pursues or that scholars recommend. Antonopoulou (2011) emphasizes that while there are a serious lack of data on all aspects of early marriage, and while early marriage is a common practice in a high number of Roma communities in Greece—all Roma women interviewed in her study had an underage marriage—there are very few studies that have examined the practice (p. 22) from a human rights and gender perspective. This is a research gap that needs to be filled, urgently, as data of this kind are essential for future policy design and implementation aimed at combating what can only be considered a serious human rights violation.

Greece stands out among EU countries for its systematic failure to submit reports to UN human rights bodies on time or with only short delays. For instance, more recently, Greece has not submitted its periodic or initial reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) (due on 18 July 2013) and to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (due on 25 June 2014). Similar multi-year delays have been registered for previous report submissions to the other UN Treaty (GHM, 2015, p. 1). The former Greek government had done little or nothing to acknowledge, let alone address, anti-Romani

sentiment and racism in Greece. In fact, one of the greatest obstacles in attempting to address the challenges of xenophobia, racism, and human rights violations in the educational system is primarily due to the fact that Greeks do not quite understand or they are not fully cognizant of their xenophobic and discriminatory attitudes. Greeks often become defensive when they are referred to as xenophobic and are quick to acquire a so-called defensive scapegoat syndrome—particularly politicians—who capitalize on growing public xenophobia that contributes to anti-immigrant, Romaphobic rhetoric, consequently placing the blame on minority populations and immigrants for the country's political, economic, and social problems. The GHM monitors, publishes, lobbies, and litigates on human and minority rights and anti-discrimination issues in Greece and, from time to time, in other European countries. The Minority Rights Group-Greece (MRG-G) focuses on studies of minorities, in Greece and in the Balkans, while the Coordinated Organizations and Communities for Roma Human Rights in Greece (SOKADRE) is a network whose members include 50 Roma communities and five Greek NGOs systematically working on Roma rights (GHM, MRG-G, & SOKADRE, 2011, 2012). Over the past several years, members (as well as the group, itself), have been harassed and physically attacked several times with relation to the assistance they provides to Greek Roma for the enjoyment of their basic human rights, including the right to adequate housing.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, there is very little awareness in schools and the greater Greek education system regarding how to deal with marginalized populations, in general. The public, or state school system in Greece is ill equipped to deal with the learning particularities of its mainstream Greek student population, let alone deal with difficulties, complexities, and adjustment struggles related to physical, cognitive, psychological, cultural, and social differences Roma, immigrant, and special needs students bring with them (Macris, 2014). School curricula of the respective level of education are, at best, a cookie cutter approach that is applied and adapted to all students, including students with special needs (Stylianidou, Bagakis, & Stamovlasis, 2004), as well as Roma students. Throughout my study, policy actors and educators, alike, confirmed that teachers are not clear on what it is they are expected or required to do with immigrant and minority students who enter their classrooms, which can be attributed to the inadequacy of teacher training, both at a pedagogical and didactic level. Such inadequacy is rooted in results from initial teacher education (i.e., in their university training) which is primarily restricted to the subject area of their specialization, i.e. language, mathematics, physics, etc. Consequently, teachers are not able to adequately deal with special needs students because they have no special education training, nor are they able to meet students' diverse and culturally specific needs because they lack adequate preparedness and training on multi and intercultural issues. As such, teachers in Greek state schools are not prepared for the challenges that accompany contemporary educational multiculturalism and social justice issues. Teacher training to combat racism and promote social justice in classrooms and in schools through critical education and empowerment processes of Roma children is essential, and may create the possibility for pedagogical philosophies (intercultural and critical) to converge within teacher training praxis. Lastly, research conducted in 2002 on behalf of the Greek Section of UNICEF for the Discrimination, Racism and Xenophobia in the Greek Education System, showed that an alarming 7 out of 10 teachers consider themselves "inadequately trained to teach foreign or immigrant students" (Stylianidou, et al., 2004, p. 37). These shortcomings are mostly attributed to deficits in teacher training programs at a university level. In addition, teacher in-service training is monolithic, and in desperate need of reform to meet the new demands placed on teachers.

What is perhaps most disturbing is the subservience of Roma women to a patriarchal community that leads to their illiteracy and ignorance of their rights. This ignorance and marginality of Romani women, it seems, is often directly and indirectly supported by politicians, policy makers, and NGOs who continue to demonstrate racial intolerance and negativity against the Romani people, in general. The role of patriarchal schemes within the community is a key factor of Roma women's oppression and is absent from the agenda of Roma non-governmental organisations. Nonetheless, some women have dared to break this taboo. One good example is the Roma Women's association "Elpida" (Hope) which was founded in 2006 by 20 Roma women who live in Drosero, a Moslem community (Antonopoulou, 2011). The women in this community have collectively tried to change the stereotyped perceptions about them by organizing group meetings to talk about the problems of the community and, at the same time, invite (and push) their husbands to take further action for those problems (CoE, 2011). These Roma women attend city council meetings and demand to participate actively in the decision-making processes. But this is only one example and is not representative, in any way, of the myriad of obstacles that face Roma women in Greek society. It is important to underscore women's rights and gender perspectives in policymaking by perhaps designating a women's rights and gender adviser to all policy-making bodies concerned with Roma, suggests Antonopoulou (2011).

### **Conclusion**

The state of affairs with regard to the Roma people in Greece, the causes of their social exclusion, the multiple problems they face, the adherence to discrimination remain, more or less, the same (Ziomas, et al., 2011). Roma peoples' living conditions continue to be substandard, inhumane and degrading, while they continue to remain deprived of a wide range of their fundamental rights. And given the serious pressures exercised on Greek society by the fiscal and economic crisis that the country is continuing to undergo, fears are expressed for an increase in discrimination for Roma people (Ziomas, et al., 2011, p. 2).

Today, almost fifteen years after the launching of the "Integrated programme for the social inclusion of the Roma" introduced in 2001, which was a study commissioned to assess current policies and record the situation of the Roma—meant to take into account the housing, employment, education, health, welfare, culture and athletics, as well as to provide strategies and institutional and financial arrangements that would aid the implementation of inclusion policies for the Roma people (Guy, 2009)—has proven to be unsuccessful, which is mainly due to lack of prioritizing for Roma people. In terms of prioritizing for Roma women, issues related to the empowerment of women have been on the international agenda, while steps have been taken over the last few years to address the issue of Roma women's discrimination, both at domestic level, as well as at the international level, as indicated in the Decade of Roma Inclusion (DRI, 2005-2015). And while the DRI project includes 12 participating countries that are actively focused on improving the socio-economic conditions and inclusion for their Roma populations, Greece is not one of the participating countries (ERRC, 2013).

Since 2014, teacher education programs that have emerged over the last few years from the University of Crete, in particular, that have actively sought to improve the conditions for the inclusion of Roma and otherwise marginalized student groups in the Greek public educational system and empower local schools with strategies that encourage intercultural understanding, communication and cooperation (Sifaki & Kalogiannaki, 2014). Such programs propose and

promote the “harmonious integration” of students of Roma origin in the educational system, with the intent of reducing dropout and revoke the school and social exclusion of the Roma children (Sifaki & Kalogiannaki, 2014). However, sustaining such programs in light of Greece’s ongoing economic struggles and fractured EU relations has proven to be difficult. Programs like ΕΣΠΑ or The National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) program that have established the broad priorities for Structural Funds Programs in Greece, are funded by the EU, and Greece’s fractured, if not nearly severed relations with the EU, have radically changed the dynamics of the Eurozone as a whole. The development and effectiveness of these programs and initiatives is an important area for future research that I develop in an upcoming research project.

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### Notes

1 The term “Gypsy” is meant to capture the term used by my relatives and is not intended to be derogatory.

2 As noted earlier in the paper, many Roma people are considered to be non-citizens, which also raises concerns with regard to how “Roma/Greek citizenship” is articulated and legitimized in Greek society.

3 Since 1993 to present, the Greek Helsinki Monitor has monitored, published, lobbied, and litigated on human and minority rights and anti-discrimination issues in Greece and, from time to time, in other European countries.

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