

## **Scientific Article for the 1st Roma Women's Gathering in Greece**

**RTRANSFORM – Roma Women transforming the educational systems around Europe through their social and political mobilizations**

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## ABSTRACT

The announcement focuses on the presentation of Roma women's views on issues related to their education, as they were documented at the First Dialogic Gathering of Roma women in Greece. The approach is qualitative and was carried out with a thematic analysis of the practices of the working groups formed in the context of the Gathering. The results of the analysis showed that the women recognize the value of education and its benefits on a personal and societal level and highlighted the most important factors that facilitate, and the hurdles that limit their access and attendance at educational programs.

## INTRODUCTION

In Greece, according to the current legal and institutional framework, everyone has access to education, but serious concerns are raised in relation to whether there are appropriate conditions for all social groups to access and stay in the official school system. The relationship of the Roma social group and more specifically of the Roma women with education is shaped and influenced by many and multi-level factors that are connected and interdependent with the social position of the Roma in society (Liezoi, 1999; OECD, 2001; Vassiliadou & Pavli Korre, 2011; Pavli Korre, 2017, 2018; Tourtouras et al., 2022). Factors such as the educational content, the school's analytic curriculums, the educational process, the school-family relationship, the personnel, the non-Roma culture but also the Roma culture about the role of women in the family and the community, the relationships between Roma and non-Roma people, the political will that is expressed in education policy, each one of them influence separately but also interdependently the education of Roma women.

According to relevant research and studies, the Roma communities are characterized by a low level of education, high levels of illiteracy and high school dropout rates, while the percentages for women are higher than for men (European Commission, 2010; FRA, 2020; Vassiliadou & Pavli Korre, 2011; Turtouras et al., 2022; Markou et al., 2018). Therefore, the emancipation of women through education is a central theme of institutions and international organizations and is often presented as their strategic goal (Mosedale, 2005; Papakonstantinou et al., 2021).

Studies showcase that educational participatory approaches foster the conditions for the empowerment of the Roma, strengthen the feeling of collectiveness and promote their individual and social integration (Laverack & Pratley, 2018), while more specifically, when it comes to women, they enable the transformation of their opinions and offer opportunities, knowledge and skills for the improvement of their position in society and the fulfillment of their personal expectations (Papakonstantinou et al., 2021). In the same logic, Ellis (1995) argues that, as long as women participate in non-formal education programs and reflect on their shared experiences, they become more confident, empowered, and they acquire the strength to act individually and collectively so that they can transform their lives and change their living conditions.

This research focuses on highlighting the views of Roma women in relation to education, as they were recorded in the 1st Dialogic Gathering, an educational methodology aimed at the substantial participation of Roma women.

## 2. DIALOGIC GATHERINGS AS A PRACTICE OF EMPOWERMENT FOR THE ROMA WOMEN

The Dialogic Gatherings are part of the European project "RTransform - Roma Women transforming the educational systems around Europe through their social and political Mobilization". Through the Dialogic Gatherings, the aim is to create an open dialogue between Roma women and educational organizations, in order to highlight the needs of the women themselves and take them into account in the policymaking processes so that their attendance at education and can be enhance and therefore benefit the Roma community as a whole.

The Dialogic Gatherings that deal with educational issues began in 2000 at the initiative of the Spanish Roma women association Drom Kotar Mestipen. In Greece they are held by the "Alternative Innovative Development" (AID) organization and two meetings have already occurred (November, 2021 and February, 2023).

The Dialogical meetings of Roma women are based on dialogic learning carried out through equal "dialogues", with interactions that recognize the "cultural intelligence" of all people and are oriented towards the transformation of prior knowledge and the socio-cultural context for the benefit of everyone. The interactions that occur during dialogic learning enhance instrumental learning and allow personal and social conceptualization, guided by the principle of solidarity, where the values of "equality" and "diversity" are compatible and mutually enriching (Public Guide – European Project).

The key elements of the structure the Dialogic Gatherings follow are: a speech by an expert, a presentation of the life stories of Roma women who are positive role models on the topic of the Gathering (European Commission, 2018), the working groups of Roma women and a presentation of their results to the plenary with an open discussion. The Organizing Committee, in which Roma women actively participate, plays an important role in the planning and implementation of the Dialogic Gatherings.

## FIRST DIALOGIC GATHERING OF ROMA WOMEN IN GREECE

### Organizing Committee

The Organizing Committee is responsible for the content of the meeting, the selection of the women who will "share" their life stories, and also for organizational issues. The only criterion for participation in the Organizing Committee is the expression of interest towards the hosting organization. The Committee also includes non-Roma women as members, the role of whom is purely supporting. At the 1st Dialogic Gathering in Greece, 10 members participated in the committee, 8 Roma women and 2 non-Roma women, and 6 meetings were held. The profile of the

members varied in terms of age and educational level, which contributed to highlighting the different perspectives, experiences and needs of Roma women in Greece.

### **Participants**

22 Roma women from different settlements throughout Greece (Thessaloniki, Florina, Corinth, Crete, Serres, Larissa, Tyrnavos, Athens) participated, they had different educational levels (primary education, elementary school graduates, high school graduates, tertiary education graduates and IEK (Institute of Vocational Training) graduates) and their age ranged from 21-47 years.

### **Gathering Materialization**

The Gathering's theme was "Dialogue on education: 1st Dialogue Meeting of Greek Roma Women" and was held on November 20, 2021 through an online platform due to the pandemic, despite the original planning to be held in person. After the speech by an expert psychologist on the return of Roma women to education, 4 life stories of Roma women were presented. After them, the women in the plenary expressed their viewpoints and then the participants were divided into three working groups to discuss their views in relation to what had already been presented.

## **AIM OF THE RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this research was to record the opinions of Roma women so that their own "voice" could be heard in matters concerning their education. More specifically, it determined the factors that hinder or facilitate their participation in education, women's views on the benefits of education, and their suggestions to strengthen their access and attendance at educational structures and programs.

The methodological approach is qualitative and was carried out with a thematic analysis of the practices of the three working groups formed in the context of the Gathering (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

## **RESULTS – CONVERSATION**

### **Barriers to Roma women's participation in education**

The thematic analysis of the working groups showed that the barriers faced by Roma women are related to the role of women in Roma culture in terms of family, labor, and community. In a school environment level, they point out that the lack of relations between the school and Roma parents, the absence of proper educational resources and appropriate educational staff, the difficulties of moving to and from school as well as the lack of information in families about the benefits of education and the educational options, become obstacles to their education.

In some areas, the condition of early marriage or assuming the roles of the mother, the wife, the housewife, the worker, and the fear of associating with non-Roma and Roma boys are key barriers for women to continue their education. As they profoundly mentioned: "I went to primary school, but I stopped. I got married young, at 13. This is how we do it here, they don't go to school when they grow up" (Γ13), "My parents said: Where will you go, girl, with the balame (Greek, non-Roma people)? What will people say? When are you going to get married;" (Γ1), "I stopped going to school because I had to take care of my younger siblings. I wanted to continue; it has always been my dream. When I had the opportunity, I did it and I don't regret it" (Γ2), "How can we go to school? All day we went here and there to work, to get a daily wage" (Γ15). What the women reported is consistent with what is reported in the bibliography about Roma women marrying at a young age, assuming adult roles in the family and their community, as well as the prevailing endogamy (Fraser, 1992; European Commission, 2010; Konstantinou et al., 2022; Pavli Korre, 2018; Tourtouras et al., 2022).

In many cases they stress that when a Roma woman tries follow a different way of life from the women of her community, she is likely to receive negative comments from other members of her community or family. They stated: "When I was looking for peers, to go to school together, no one came. On the contrary, they reacted racistly, mockingly" (Γ5).

At the same time, some women reported that attending school presented difficulties, as they did not feel accepted and experienced racism. Specifically, Γ6 claimed "I don't have good experiences, I didn't have friends at school, and I was trying". What is reported by the Roma women is consistent with what is reported by Dimitriou about the problems she faced, on the one hand from members of the Roma community and on the other hand from the school during her education (Vasiliadou & Pavli Korre, 2011). Moreover, the participants pointed out that the lack of school and Roma parent relations and the absence of appropriate educational resources and practices are inhibiting factors that make it difficult for Roma women and children to attend school, reinforcing the belief that "the school doesn't want us, so we don't want it either" (Γ5), "Furthermore, another problem is that when parents want to know about their children's educational progress, they ask questions...but there is also the problem of underestimation and lack of understanding, and they still leave with the same questions and concerns" (Γ9). According to Flecha and Soler (2013) teachers' stereotypical views on Roma parents' views on education lead, on one hand, the teachers not to dialogue with Roma parents and, on the other, the lead Roma parents to believe that school is an institution of the non-Roma world resulting in the educational marginalization of Roma. It is also worth noting the point by Γ12 about the geographical distance of the school from the Roma settlement, which is another obstacle: "The school was a long way, and my parents were afraid to send me. Let alone that we didn't even have a means of transport, no busses passed" (Γ12). All the above findings are in line with what Banks mentions about the school approach as a social system consisting of many interrelated elements and variables, which will have to change substantially in order to achieve educational equality (as cited in Pavli Korre, 2017).

Finally, the lack of information about the benefits of education and the educational options and outlets that exist was highlighted "There is not enough information for parents about educational prospects, parents do not know what paths they could follow after high school..." (Γ9),

"They do not know, for example, that Roma Community Centers are linked to education. They are mostly unknown to most Roma, and they only chase after the economic benefits and not for other services" (Γ4). Low educational capital (Bourdieu, 1986) creates a specific context that limits the educational opportunities of the Roma, deteriorating their position, while it becomes evident that knowledge and information on educational possibilities can facilitate their participation and retention in education.

### **Facilitating factors of education**

From the thematic analysis, it turns out that the most important factors in facilitating their educational attendance are the supportive family and school environment, the existence of positive role models within the family, the inclusion of Roma history and folklore in school textbooks, the use of appropriate educational practices, the raising of awareness within pedagogical departments on issues of Roma culture. Additionally, an important factor for the enhancement of the women's school attendance seems to be the networking with other Roma women, their participation in collaborative educational activities such as the Dialogic Gatherings, the establishment of Second Chance Schools near Roma communities and the implementation of local empowerment programs based on the needs of these women.

A supportive family environment (Liezoi, 1999; Vassiliadou & Pavli Korre, 2011) and the presence of positive role models (European Commission, 2018) came to be quite important factors while in the absence of this support in the family sphere, the women highlighted that it is possible for them to be motivated and encouraged by a good relationship between educators and students in the school (Flecha & Soler, 2013). More specifically, it was stated: "It is very important for a young Roma child to receive the love shown by the teacher. Teachers act as good examples...The teacher must have the strength and mindset to support the child's right to learn" (Γ13), "I wanted to go to school because of my sister. She wanted to study herself, they didn't let her continue school...The parents then sent her away and that's how I managed to continue too" (Γ20).

They also claimed that networking with other Roma women, participating in Dialogue Meetings and implementing local empowerment programs based on their needs has a positive impact on their own educational journey as they gain strength and more confidence in recognizing that they too can achieve their own goals. It was stated: "It is a driving force for a Roma woman when she meets and interacts with other women, whether Roma or not, with whom she has a common starting point, the same obstacles and problems as well as common standards. These women act as positive role models for us, and I think that since one can do something and overcome a situation, then I can too" (Γ8), "These programs help us learn about ourselves and others. I learned about myself through them. They should be held in every neighborhood" (Γ17). What the participants reported is consistent with the bibliography on the benefits of women's participation in educational programs that promote reflection on shared experiences, individual and collective action for change and transformation (Ellis, 1995; Freire, 1970).

The participants put particular emphasis on the features that the woman herself should possess in order to have a successful educational course, focusing on persistence, flexibility, the willingness to face comments and argue, but also for her to want to "break" the stereotypes.

In order to improve the school performance of Roma women and their children, the participants suggested, based on their experiences, the establishment of corroborative departments for parents and children, so that they can complete homework and the parents, respectively, to learn ways to support their children.

Regarding the improvement of the relationships between Roma parents and educators, the participants suggested the training and awareness of the future educators, that are now studying in the pedagogical University Departments, on the specificities of the living conditions and the culture of the Roma, confirming what is mentioned in the relevant bibliography about the important role of compatibility and the training of educators that concern vulnerable social groups (Pavli Korre, 2017).

An important proposal from Roma women for the enrichment of the analytical content of the school in the direction of a multicultural content (Pavli Korre, 2017) concerns the use of more appropriate educational materials referring to the "minority" Greek dialects in order to highlight diversity and multiculturalism and the inclusion of Roma history and folklore.

### **Benefits of education**

The main issues that arose in relation to the benefits of education for Roma women are that education is the main means to improve their own lives and the lives of their children and also the means to acquire skills so that they can work and become independent. It was typically mentioned: "Education means independence, to do what I want" (Γ19) and "I want a better quality of life compared to the life and difficulties that me and my parents had. As a child I experienced difficult situations in the family environment, but through this I gained more will so that my child can have a better life, and this can happen through education" (Γ14). The women's remarks are aligned with the position that learning and participating in educational procedures is a means to achieve personal, social, and economic prosperity (OECD, 2001).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As it becomes evident from the thematic analysis of the practices of the working groups of Roma women who participated in the 1st Dialogic Gathering in Greece, Roma women recognize the value of education both on an individual and on a social level. By identifying the main factors that hinder or facilitate their access and participation in education, they highlight the need to transform, on one hand, the school as a system in the direction of a multicultural school, and on the other, the need to transform the Roma culture, which effects on an individual and social level the relationship of Roma women with education.

The Dialogic Gatherings, having equal dialogue, cultural intelligence, the creation of personal and social meanings, solidarity, networking, and equality in diversity, as their basic principles, they create a space of open dialogue, where Roma women themselves can share experiences, exchange opinions and concerns about their educational path, without having to give up or haggle their cultural identity.



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