
Romani Women in Leadership: Overcoming Challenges and Building

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The underrepresentation of Romani women in different areas of decision-making is one of the manifestations of historical and structural gender inequalities in the exercise of power. With a low presence of Romani women in decision-making, issues such as development, the economy, justice, health, and education, thereby ignoring the assets of their contributions to societies and the disproportionate consequences and impacts these issues have on their lives and rights in all areas. In Europe, racism and gender discrimination are further challenges that force Romani women to the periphery of society. Increased racism and anti-Gypsyism in the context of a worldwide economic crisis, as well as international mobility of Romani families, jeopardizes the safety of Romani women and girls, leaving them more exposed to social exclusion, exploitation, trafficking, and abuse. Traditional family roles, which many Romani women occupy, provide further exclusionary mechanisms.

Women make up almost half of the world's population ^[1], yet they have historically been underrepresented in positions of leadership.

Gender discrimination and adherence to traditional gender norms have been essential elements in this, and continue to play a significant part in women's continued marginalization in all fields of life. Our society tells women that how they look is more important than what they can achieve. When women strive to lead or advocate for themselves and others, they frequently meet resistance.

Despite acquiring more bachelor's degrees than a man, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership in practically every industry in Europe states the European Institute for Gender Equality.^[2] The scientific literature has emphasized the challenges Roma women have had in overcoming prejudice and inequities that they and the Roma people as a whole have experienced. However, there has been little focus on how Roma women organize to fight this reality.

How did certain Romnja get to positions of leadership despite their inferior position?

One of the answers is in the research I conducted in March 2023 on the Faculty of Philosophy in Nis by working on my Master's degree. The purpose of the research was to find the answer to how some Romnja became leaders knowing their inferior position. Through the Thematic Analysis which is a flexible method for identifying, interpreting, and reporting on patterns observed in the analyzed data this research was conducted. The participants were interviewed with an open-ended structured question.

The research "Support from the nuclear family in regards to the professional development of women in leadership positions", concluded that: (99% of the participants were Romnja): Most of the respondents were born in families where the parents were relatively uneducated and in which the respondents had the opportunity to see from the example of their parents that the lack of education leads to an unsatisfactory financial situation, which in a large number of the respondents caused an incentive for them to improve professionally and not to put themselves in the same situation. Most often, these are families that were not rich and lived on a salary, and in cases where only the father in the family worked. These interviewees emphasized in different ways that they lived in harmonious families, which were not spared from problems, but in which they had conditions for growing up and an atmosphere of support from parents and family. Despite historical and current challenges that we as Romani women face, our Roma parents play a key role in supporting us to become leaders. One of the findings was the differences between Romnja who are leaders and those who aren't which is the Family they grew up in, what they were taught as girls when it comes to leading, and the support they received or haven't received. Some of the statement from the Romani women's research about the support from their family was:

„The attitude of parents towards all children is not the same, even today I can graduate from three faculties, but still I am just a woman. “

„When you look at general education, there was what was allowed for boys and what for girls. The parents were very strict about the honor of female children, while they were very tolerant towards their son without any rules or obligations. “

In this research, it was determined that the key components for the professional leadership development of Romnja are precisely the support provided by parents in childhood, but also later in adulthood, support from partners, involvement in informal activities, and engaging in activism. Another aspect that is important is that Gadže women and Romani women don't have equal opportunities for success. Romani women remain behind non-Romani women in most important aspects of life, including work, education, and health. They must confront the current patriarchy and deep-seated anti-gypsyism in its different forms and expressions. Gender, race/ethnicity, country, class, age, and sexual orientation all interact to make Romani women an especially vulnerable social category.

Also, many political institutions do not adequately or equally represent women in positions of leadership or decision-making, gender inequality is also evident there. As an illustration, Serbia describes its political system as democratic, which implies that citizens choose their representatives through party elections. Despite this, there were just four women in Serbia's Parliament at the start of the country's multi-party system. There are now laws and initiatives that support increased involvement of women in politics, as well as quotas and other affirmative action programs, but there hasn't been any proof that this has had a real impact. Despite there being over 200,000 Romani women in Serbia ^[4], they are rarely taken into account when choices are made. There are presently no actions taken to address Serbia's lack of representation. Romani women and girls face additional challenges, making the journey to the top even tougher. This creates a self-fulfilling paradox in which Romani women are subjected to policies and programs that are not tailored to their needs and are frequently harmful, while also facing uneven burdens on the way to positions of prominence as a result of these policies.

Besides the support from a family, Romnja needs additional support. It's crucial to empower Romani women and girls to participate in society, by organizing politically discussing the current situation and status of Romani women, and identifying the pressing issues that need to be addressed. Also, what is important is to support women in climbing the ladder of a decision-maker, because Romani women need to be asked about questions that concern them and be part of the solution. It's important to raise greater awareness about issues impacting Romani women's equality, taking a stance to call out inequality while working to forge positive action, highlighting and applauding where important gains are being made, and celebrating women's achievements and accomplishments. Knowing the context behind Romnja raising and becoming a leader is a rough path, that's why we must pave the way for Romnja to take the lead. The recognition of women's leadership within institutions, social and familial structures, and politics was a significant component in the growth of the women's movement and the institutionalization of women's rights and gender equality.

[1] [https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/demographic-facts-sheets/faq/more-men-or-women-in-the-world/#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20men%20and,496%20are%20women%20\(49.6%25\).](https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/demographic-facts-sheets/faq/more-men-or-women-in-the-world/#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20men%20and,496%20are%20women%20(49.6%25).)

[2] https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/garcia_working_paper_5_academic_careers_gender_i nequality.pdf

[3] <https://homeostasisgroup.com/doziviljaj-podrske-od-strane-nuklearne-porodice-u-pogledu-prof esionalnog-usavrsavanja-kod-zena-na-liderskim-pozicijama/>

[4] <https://autonomija.info/romkinje-zahtevaju-vece-ucesce-u-radu-skupstine-srbije/>