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Improving the situation of older Roma in the EU:

Executive summary of interviews with older Roma in summer 2010

Older Roma are a much neglected group in today's political discourse on the social and economic integration of Roma. Given the EU's rapidly evolving demography and our ageing population, AGE and ERIO believe it is necessary to draw attention to the largely invisible group of older Roma, many of whom face unacceptable levels of poverty, exclusion and discrimination which obstruct their ability to enjoy their fundamental rights and prevents their integration into mainstream society.

These difficulties are compounded by the challenges of ageing that are common to all older people living in the EU. As yet, little attention has been paid to identifying how the needs of this growing group of older Roma can be met. AGE and ERIO stress the importance of ensuring that older Roma will be integrated into EU initiatives on Roma inclusion and will be considered as part of the target groups in the forthcoming 2012 European Year on Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity.

Introduction

This executive summary is the precursor to a broader position paper that will build on reflections among AGE and ERIO members and draw, in particular, on a series of interviews carried out for AGE by a Roma researcher¹ among older individuals and groups within Roma and Sinti communities in Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and Poland during summer 2010.

These four countries were chosen to present different national contexts that illustrate the varying situations which older Roma experience. This field research brought together the observations and experiences of a cross-section of older Roma women and men and gave them the opportunity to voice how they as older Roma feel that their

¹ AGE and ERIO thank Maryana Borisova for her research among Roma communities in Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and Poland during summer 2010.

situations should be improved. A 'wish list' of their hopes and aspirations is included within this short paper.

Our aim is to present a brief but realistic picture of some of the challenges that older Roma are struggling against and the barriers that are preventing them from enjoying the fundamental rights that are afforded to all people living in the EU. We hope that this will be a first step to raising awareness about some of the most problematic issues that older Roma individuals are facing and we will focus on issues surrounding their employment, decent housing, adequate income in old age, and health and long-term care.

It must be kept in mind that not only are older Roma people quite diverse but their lifestyles and living standards vary considerably, according to national social systems and individual circumstances. Their levels of understanding of the socio-economic and political contexts in which they live and their individual capacities to function in these environments also differ.

It should be added that the mindset of Roma people is also quite specific. They always place the family, and especially their children, in first place in their life to the extent that when they are asked about their own difficulties or way of living, they express more concern about the lives of their children than about themselves. Older Roma tend to look back on the past as a more ordered time with less racism and consider that life for the young today is more difficult.

Social exclusion



Social exclusion appears to be a common problem among all older Roma who were interviewed. Many of the respondents indicated that they suffer from loneliness, despite living with their family, and felt a lack of respect or value towards them as older Roma. Their living conditions and lifestyles are often not conducive to having a social and organised community life and notions of civil, cultural and social participation often mean little to them. Since they have lived in conditions of poverty for so long, they do not have the mindset of wanting to be engaged in society or have the motivation to seek out a social and cultural life beyond their immediate family.

Furthermore, many older Roma live in marginalised areas and their lives are often restricted to the Roma districts in which they live. It can be very difficult for older Roma who want to engage in society to do so as older people's

community centres do not exist, even in the larger Roma districts, and opportunities to lead a social life are severely restricted. This is compounded by a loss of confidence in society since they have heard politicians make promises yet have seen little positive change or progress in their lives. Often the encampments in which they live provide the entirety of their existence and they rarely venture out.

Access to fundamental rights

There is a general lack of awareness among older Roma of their rights. For instance, some older Roma in Sofia expressed a complete lack of understanding of what the terms discrimination or social inclusion mean. This is perhaps one reason for the high level of discrimination that older Roma in Bulgaria face. It was found that Roma aged 50+ are seldom aware of what fundamental rights mean and that these are something that the state is obliged to assure.

Some of the questions which were posed to older Roma interviewees about their experiences of discrimination, even quite simple ones, sometimes did not make sense to them. When the matter of fundamental rights was explained to them in simple language, they understood better and indicated that they often feel that their own fundamental rights are not respected in terms of the daily difficulties they encounter and the harsh conditions in which they often live. However, Roma people in Germany with immigrant and refugee backgrounds indicated that they have a better knowledge about their rights and are more familiar with procedures but they sometimes feel it necessary to hide their Roma origin for fear of discrimination and refusal of help.

One of the main problems appears to be the lack of information available to Roma about citizen's fundamental rights. A further problem is the derogatory behaviour expressed towards Roma, in particular to old Roma. Interviewees indicated that older Roma people often experience unequal treatment in hospitals and by local authority institutions etc and that they feel like second class people.

Employment

The biggest problem among Roma communities is unemployment and older Roma face significant discrimination in the area of employment. In the past, they were able to earn their living as skilled craftsmen (which are no longer in demand because of mass production) or, in the post-communist countries, where everybody was obliged to work, they had jobs too. However Roma were the first group to lose their jobs when the political systems in those countries changed 20 years ago since in general they lacked the education and qualifications needed to gain work in these new market economies.

Nearly 80% of the growing old Roma population in the interviewed districts in Bulgaria can only work on the "black



market". Another significant factor is the strong negative attitude of employers towards Roma, most of whom refuse to employ Roma for vacant positions. The issue of employment is also complicated in Italy and Germany by older Roma's lack of citizen status. Roma also face discrimination in the private sector when looking for a job. There is also the phenomenon that when they do have work, for instance in companies or hotels in Germany and Italy, they keep their Roma origin secret. One of the main reasons for this are the prevailing stereotypes that exist towards Roma.

In general, older Roma lack opportunities, have few if any qualifications, have low literacy levels and are ill informed about how to seek out opportunities or to push for their rights. They often meet discrimination from desk managers in job centres or are not included in employment training programmes. Furthermore, nobody explains to them why they do not receive job offers. What they require is a special policy addressed to meeting their needs. They need to gain qualifications in order to acquire regular jobs. Access to information has to be improved and they need support from social workers, NGOs or social mediators. There is a good example in the municipality of Lom (Bulgaria) where support is provided to them about procedures and they are given help to prepare job applications and documents.

Decent housing

Many older Roma in the EU do not live in adequate conditions for a dignified life. In the poorest counties, such as Bulgaria and Poland, poverty and historical features have led the Roma to build their housing in isolated, Roma-friendly areas where the living conditions are inadequate. This is a particular problem for older Roma as it hinders their mobility and restricts their lives.



For instance, in the larger towns in Bulgaria, there are Roma ghettos where many houses are in very poor condition with leaking roofs and no running water. In the largest Roma district in Sofia, around 40% of the Roma population is 45-50 years old and many of them live in one or two rooms in unmaintained streets without utility connections. Often older Roma with disabilities and chronic conditions have to survive in such poor conditions and must rely on the support and help of their children and other family members, in particular if they are widowed, since state support is not forthcoming.

In contrast, in Germany, older Roma, in particular those with a refugee background (Kosovo, Montenegro, ex-Yugoslavia), benefit from state and municipal social support. They usually live with their families in rented

apartments or small houses with considerably better conditions.

Whereas in Rome (Italy), 80% of the Roma population lives in encampments on the outskirts of Rome, only some of which are authorised. Here, older Roma live in caravans or wooden barracks and their space is very constricted. However, those Roma who are refugees, immigrants or Italian citizens, live in rented housing around Rome.

Older Roma lack an adequate income in old age

The majority of Roma lack adequate income in old age. Access to and receipt of pensions and state assistance varies between countries and in terms of the payment amounts received. Some of the Roma interviewed claimed that they did not receive sickness allowances to which they should have been entitled for health reasons. They felt they had not been taken seriously because of their Roma origin. There appears to be a general problem in each of the four countries in that older Roma expressed feeling discriminated against when trying to claim their rights to minimum income for retired people.



These problems are compounded by two factors. Firstly, the impact of the political changes in the former Communist countries means that although almost all older Roma have worked, they are ineligible to receive a pension. Secondly, the added factor of the economic crisis is having a pronounced effect on the employment prospects of older Roma in all four countries since they are particularly vulnerable to permanent unemployment and lack connections and a support network which could help them gain work. Furthermore, many Roma have been employed without contracts and cannot prove their employment history or any national insurance contributions made on their behalf. One example of this problem are Bulgarian Roma who have worked abroad in the building sector.

Most older Roma do not feel they have sufficient income to cover their essential needs let alone provide an adequate quality of life. The only Roma interviewed who considered they could manage on their income were those in Germany who were living on state social assistance whereas in Bulgaria and Poland it is difficult for Roma pensioners to subsist on their pensions alone. Older Bulgarian Roma are in a particularly desperate position since the state pension, if they can access one, is equivalent to only 25-30 euro per month which is insufficient even to pay for their utility bills. It is also rare that they are able to generate additional income. The only older Roma who are in a more comfortable position are those who are still practicing some craft or running a family business.

Lack of access to health and long-term care

While access to health care is one of the most significant problems among Roma of any age, it is particularly acute for older Roma for several reasons. There is the issue of lack of health insurance which is closely linked to an inability to maintain monthly payments into national insurance schemes due to lack of work and regular income. Medical services are reluctant to enter Roma camps (Italy) and ghettos (Bulgaria). The poor infrastructure and location of Roma communities is usually used as the excuse for the emergency services not to visit Roma in need. Older Roma have to rely on other Roma to be able to take them to a hospital by car when this is needed. In Germany, older Roma do not experience difficulties in accessing health care providing they have proof of residence status. However, there are cases where older Roma people felt discriminated against when seeking hospital care because they are Roma.

The cultural approach taken by Roma has some specificities that differentiate it from the majority of European mindsets. For example, older Roma will rarely agree to go into residential care. They will prefer to be cared for by family members even when they become very old and frail since this is the practice and tradition in Roma families. There are often cases where an older Roma person has a terminal condition but has to rely on the help of family members at home since no opportunity exists for them to remain in hospital or to be accommodated in a hospice. This type of care is difficult for Roma people to receive due to lack of information and support to understand the procedures or a personal reluctance to leave their family.

“I wish that...”

Here are some wishes expressed by the older Roma people who were interviewed in Roma communities in Bulgaria, Germany, Italy and Poland:

“I wish there would be...”

- ...work for everybody, especially for my younger family members;
- ...better living conditions;
- ...somebody to be interested in my difficulties and problems as I grow older
- ...some help with getting hold of information and dealing with my documents;
- ...better health care for the Roma communities;
- ...organised events so I can get to meet and know other people, places and Roma from other countries so we can share our life experiences and thoughts as older people;
- ...more opportunities to meet with relatives;
- ...younger educated people on hand to give me a bit of help when I need it;



- ...community festivals to give us the chance to show off our craft skills and products and, if possible, some assistance from the state to help us market and sell these;
- ...short vacations so I can experience each summer what older Europeans experience;
- ...some initiatives or events specifically directed at older Roma where we will feel respected by others, including by the young and non-Roma.”

Next steps

AGE and ERIO will launch a joint press release on 8 April, International Roma Day, to stress the importance of ensuring that older Roma will be part of the target groups for the upcoming 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity and for their needs to be taken on board in the context of the EU Framework of National Roma Integration Strategies. AGE and ERIO would like to recommend that the EU event to mark the International Roma Day on 8 April 2012 be devoted to older Roma.

AGE and ERIO will develop a more detailed paper to mark the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on 17 October 2011. We will also put forward a series of recommendations for concrete policy measures which we believe could have a substantive impact in improving the situation of older Roma in the EU.

It is hoped that these initiatives will mark the first steps in EU efforts to improve the specific situation of older Roma as the discrimination that this part of our population faces needs to be urgently addressed.

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