



**STRENGTHENING THE ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP OF  
ROMA WOMEN THROUGH THEIR PARTICIPATION  
IN THE ROMA POLITICAL SCHOOL IN GREECE**

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**Abstract:**

This article explores the participation of Roma women in public life and how this is strengthened through their participation in the Roma Political School in Greece. The study focused on the reasons for participation and the expectations of women from their participation in the Roma Political School, but also on the barriers they encounter and the opportunities they are given to participate in social and political events. It has highlighted the emergence of proposals for the empowerment and strengthening of the position of Roma women in politics. A qualitative methodology was followed, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 4 Roma women and two officials of the Council of Europe who participated in the Roma Political School in Greece. The findings of the study showed that progress has been made towards the active citizenship of Greek Roma women and, through their participation in the RPS, women expect to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills in order to actively participate in the community and contribute to resolving the problems and addressing the needs of their community. However, there are also several inhibiting factors that affect the active citizenship of women: stereotypical perceptions of the position of women prevailing in the Gypsy community, women's low level of education, and their lack of self-confidence. The main proposals that emerged in relation to strengthening women's participation in

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the public sphere are related to information and the dissemination of information, the strengthening of women's participation in associations, the participation of women in education and adult education and in specialized political programs, and the breaking down of stereotypes concerning the position of women.

**Keywords:** Roma women, active citizenship, non-formal education, Council of Europe, Roma political school

## 1. Introduction

In the first European institutional texts of the European Commission (1998) and the European Council (2000), active citizenship aims at greater social cohesion and is described as *“as a way of empowering citizens to have their voice heard within their communities, a sense of belonging and stake in the society in which they live, the value of democracy, equality and understanding different cultures and different opinions”* (Hoskins, 2009, p. 462). Hoskins defines active citizenship as *“Participation in civil society, community and/or political life, characterised by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy”* (Hoskins et. al. 2006, p. 11). It should be noted that active citizenship refers to participation on a local, regional, national, European, and international level, and is approached in the very broadest sense of the word “participation” and is not restricted to the political dimension. In this study, it is important to underline the close connection of the term “active citizenship” with terms such as “participation” and “equality”, as defined within the framework of democracy. Participation and equality are found in social and political events regardless of gender, origin, religion, or any other categorization criteria.

In the past, the representation of a Roma community to the surrounding society was carried out by the community leader or by the head of the family/clan. Through this representation, the Roma communicated the serious problems that concerned them, seeking help in order to resolve them, claiming their rights and raising their voices on issues of their community. As the years went by, the pace of the surrounding society increased and the relations between Roma and non-Roma became more frequent, demanding, and multi-layered. This gave rise to the need for collective representation, both at the group level and on a larger and broader scale, and eventually the creation of associations to take on this role (Liégeois, 1994). The first Greek association to be established was the Panhellenic Educational Association of Greek Roma in Agia Varvara in 1939. It is worth mentioning that while the establishment of the association was a project and initiative developed by Roma women, women actually began to participate and vote in its elections many years later, in 1985. This Association represented the Greek Roma for many years both to the Greek authorities and abroad (Pavlis Korres, 2018). The efforts that have been made in recent decades for collective representation at the panhellenic level are also worth mentioning, with typical examples being the Panhellenic Federation of Greek Roma Associations and the Panhellenic Association of Greek Roma

(PEER), the Panhellenic Confederation of Greek Roma (Ellan Passe). What is more, at the regional level, the Federation of Greek Roma Associations of Thessaly also has to be mentioned.

This article explores the participation of Roma women in public life and how this is strengthened through their participation in the Roma Political School (RPS) in Greece. The study examines the reasons and expectations of women from their participation in RPS, as well as the barriers they encounter in their participation in public life and brings about the emergence of the study participants' proposals for the empowerment of Roma women and the strengthening of their active citizenship.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Women's Participation in Public Life

One issue of great concern across Europe is ensuring women's participation in public life and decision-making processes. Despite international conventions, studies and recommendations, the participation rate of women in political bodies in all European countries remains extremely low (Khader, 2011; Kumar, 2017; Shreeves, 2021; European Commission, 2010). Several organizations have been established in order to strengthen women's participation in public life and it is a fact that their participation rates have increased (Yani & Hidayat, n.d.), while now women's empowerment through education is at the heart of institutions and international organizations and is often presented as a strategic goal (Unterhalter, 2007; Mosedale, 2005; Papakonstantinou, Pavlis Korres, Ladopoulos, 2021). In most countries, women have managed to excel in their education, their social status has improved, and their strengthening in the labor market is small, but certainly noticeable. Despite all the progress that has been made, women's political representation is still incomplete and inadequate and there are still barriers in women's participation in political life, such as the balance between personal and political life, the almost nonexistent provision of assistance to working mothers, the non-preference of women as candidates to political parties and the stigma that women have carried over time that they have no place in public life (Jarvis, 2008; Leijenaar, 2004; Turner, 1993; Kumar, 2017; Shreeves, 2021).

Approaching the issue of women's participation in politics, Mandal (2013, p.22) states that *"Politics decide who will get what and how much. Hence, empowering women politically is the highest need of the hour. Women's political empowerment implies the decentralization of power and authority in the deprived, oppressed, and powerless people who have not been able to participate in the decision-making processes and implementation of policies and programs of both government organizations as well as familial and societal matters"*. She argues that education is a powerful and valuable means of achieving women's political empowerment. Education can also be a powerful tool for socio-political transformation. Through education, women gain self-confidence, self-esteem, self-sufficiency, break down stereotypes and prejudices, and cultivate social, political, spiritual, cultural, and religious awareness. Similarly, Ellis (1995) argues that, as women participate in non-

formal education and training programs and reflect on their shared experiences, they acquire new skills and greater self-confidence; they are empowered and strengthened to act individually and collectively in order to transform their lives and turn the situation around.

## **2.2. The position of Roma women in the family and community and their place in education**

The Roma are not a typical example of a homogeneous community (European Commission, 2010) and this is because there are many different groups, which, despite their common basis, differ from each other in many ways. Liégeois (1994) characterizes the Roma as a mosaic that, while constituting a single whole, consists of many different tiles. Pavlis Korres (2018) also states that *“anyone referring to the Greek Roma should avoid simplistic generalizations, as Gypsy groups do not constitute a unified whole. There are many differentiations between them, which are directly related to many factors, such as the type and place of residence, the route of arrival and residence of each individual gypsy group in Greece, their occupation, and their degree of integration into Greek society”* (p. 305).

The core of Roma social organization is the family, which is patriarchal and extensive, while in recent decades, in several cases, it is also found in the nuclear form (Pavlis Korres, 2018). The position of men and women in the family is based on the patriarchal model. There is an obvious separation between men and women both in terms of their position and in terms of the distribution of their responsibilities within the family (Fraser, 1992). The man is the ‘head’ of the household, the leader, the one who is obliged to look after the family. He is the one who works to be able to provide the necessities. The man represents the family in social events and to the rest of the group (Acton, 1974; Crowe, 1995; Liégeois, 1986). Women are responsible for the home, the household, and their children with all that this entails (Fraser, 1992; Liégeois, 1994). Within this patriarchal family structure, the role of women is very important, as they are the ones responsible for the preservation and the intergenerational transmission of customs and traditions (Pavlis Korres, Spanouli, & Kaloudi, 1991). The figure of the elderly Roma woman is considered almost sacred (Liégeois, 1994). Older women play an important role in decision-making and their opinion is sought and valued when decisions are made on important issues concerning the family or even the whole community (Pavlis Korres et al., 1991). Lydaki (1997) even argues that the role of women in Gypsy society is elevated compared to that prevailing in Western societies, as they not only rule within the home, but are also involved in affairs outside the home.

In Roma communities, young girls take on the adult role of wife, mother, and housewife from a very young age. They are expected to marry and have children as soon as possible. Even when young girls are not married, they are often driven to drop out of school in order to help in the household, take care of their younger siblings and initiate themselves into their future roles. Such practices constitute an inhibiting factor for women who cannot thus continue their education, enter the labor market, and pursue their personal fulfillment (European Commission, 2010; Mentis et al., 2011). Over time,

however, changes take place in the age at which marriage takes place, as can be seen from studies conducted for both men and women. Pavlis Korres (2018), citing data from studies conducted over the last thirty years, argues that within these thirty years (1986-2013) there was an upward shift in the age of marriage for both men and women, as well as a statistically significant relationship between factors such as the age of marriage and school attendance.

Members of Roma communities have a low level of education, high levels of illiteracy and their school drop-out rates are high (European Commission, 2010; Vassiliadou & Pavlis Korres, 2011; Markou, Parthenis, Papakonstantinou, & Pavlis Korres, 2018; Tourtouras, Pavlis Korres, & Kyridis, 2016). It is encouraging that, over the years, and with the contribution of the educational programs that have been implemented for Roma inclusion, the rates of school participation are now higher. This is mostly the case in those living in homes and near or within urban centers, and as far as young girls, but also adult women are concerned, in both formal and non-formal education programs (Vassiliadou & Pavlis Korres, 2011; Markou et al., 2018). Pavlis Korres (2018), referring to Roma participation in parents' meetings, which is higher than their participation in school governing bodies, argues that participation is directly linked to their social integration, which is related to the way and place of residence of the Roma. She raises the issue of effective parental participation claiming that *"the issue is not simply that Roma parents should participate in meetings and bodies. We also need to ensure that equal conditions for their participation exist if our goal is to develop meaningful multicultural/intercultural relations"* (p.316-317).

Roma women are usually not actively involved in the public sphere. As mentioned above, the man is responsible for representing the family. In fact, in some Roma communities, women are not allowed to take part in public activities without the accompaniment of their husbands or, in other cases, they are forbidden to leave their community. This, of course, implies their lack of participation in socio-political life and the difficulty of developing of the necessary social skills in order to find a job (Leijenaar, 2004). However, it is a fact that women are slowly beginning to take on more responsibilities beyond the household and the family and to participate in social and political life. They are coming together in cooperatives and struggling to make their voices heard. Many of the conservative elements of the traditional families that held them back are beginning to fade away. However, this is not the case for all communities and the changes that are being made are very slow (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014; Crowley, Genova, & Sansonetti, 2013).

### **3. Material and Methods**

#### **3.1. Roma Political School Program**

Since 2013, the Council of Europe has supported initiatives involving Roma local communities through various programs such as ROMED2, ROMACT and, more recently, ROMACTED (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers>). The Roma Political

School is a Council of Europe project involving Greece, Italy, Portugal, Turkey, and Ukraine. The Council of Europe took the initiative to implement the Roma Political School in Greece for the first time in 2019. It was implemented in cooperation with Alternative Innovative Development - A.I.D. (aid.com.gr), a civil society organization. Its initial objectives, as formulated by the experts of the Council of Europe and the scientific team of A.I.D., were for the Roma themselves to understand the needs of their communities by identifying common characteristics, to be informed on Greek political issues that concern them, to be informed on issues of political strategy, to get to know the representatives of local and regional government and to develop skills appropriate for their political involvement and course. The program included two three-day group training sessions that took place in Thessaloniki between October and December 2019 and follow up actions on an individual level. A total of 26 people participated in the program, out of which 13 were women.

### **3.2. Aim of the Study**

The aim of the study was to investigate the participation of Roma women in public life and how this is enhanced through their participation in the Roma Political School in Greece. More specifically, the reasons for participation and women's expectations from their participation in the RPS, the barriers encountered in their involvement in public life, as well as the proposals of the participants in the study concerning the empowerment of Roma women and the strengthening of their active citizenship were studied. The main questions of the study were related to:

- 1) The reasons for participation and the expectations of Roma women from the Roma Political School;
- 2) The ways the knowledge and skills gained from their participation in the RPS were utilized;
- 3) The inhibiting factors-barriers to women's participation in educational/political/professional and other activities;
- 4) The recording of the study participants' proposals concerning the empowerment of Roma women and the strengthening of their active citizenship.

### **3.3. Methodology**

The study was carried out using a qualitative method by conducting semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2000). The participants in the research were Roma women who participated in the Roma Political School program in Greece, and Council of Europe officials who participated as keynote speakers in the 2nd training three-day program. The data were processed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

### **3.4. Participants**

Four Roma women participated in the study out of the 13 Roma Political School participants. The women who participated in the study reside in different settlements around Greece (Thessaloniki, Florina, Korinthos) and have different levels of education

(two high school graduates, one graduate of Higher Education and one graduate of an Institute of Vocational Training (IEK) and current student at the Hellenic Open University). They are of different ages (26, 31, 36, and 36 years old), different marital statuses (one divorced with a child, two unmarried and one unmarried with custody of her brother's three children) and different employment statuses (two unemployed, two working as mediators in Roma Community Centers). In addition, two of them have participated in other non-formal education programs. In this way, an attempt was made to include women from different economic and social backgrounds, since, as mentioned above, the Roma are not a homogeneous group (Liégeois, 1994; Pavlis Korres, 2018).

At the same time, two interviews were conducted with two keynote speakers of the program who were Council of Europe officials with many years of experience in Roma issues. This way, the participation of Roma women in such programs and the ways it could be strengthened were seen from their point of view. Both these members have been working at the Council of Europe, one for 20 years (O1) and the other for 16 years (O2). In recent years, they have held managerial positions in the Roma and Travelers Division of the Council of Europe.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Roma Women Interviews

#### 4.1.1 Reasons for participation and expectations of Roma women from the Roma Political School

The thematic analysis of the interviews in relation to women's expectations from the RPS highlighted the following themes: gaining practical knowledge and developing skills to participate more actively in the community, knowing the processes to promote demands related to the needs of their community, and preparing for participation as candidates in elections. For example, W1 says, *"I wanted to learn some basic things about politics. I wanted to know how the decision-making process is done, that is, how these meetings are held, how I can participate in them..."*, and W3 stated: *"...and it was interesting because quite by chance, I had entered the recent elections as a counselor, so it was of immediate interest to me."*

In expressing their expectations from their participation in the RPS, the women refer to the need to support women who are particularly vulnerable, the youth, or rather, *"the hope of our future"*, and older people who are looking for a second chance. W4 says, *"I am involved in the public life, and I am very interested in uplifting our race a little bit, especially women. I also want to help the youth a little bit, which is what everyone strives for. However, we have to help older people as well, people aged 40-45. In the second chance school, I have met a lot of people who are in need of professional and general help."* W2, focusing on the multi-vulnerability experienced by women and the difficulty of their role, states that what drives her is the goal of improving the position of women *"I like to help vulnerable groups and more so women. Women are more vulnerable, and, in the case of Roma, they suffer double the harm."*

The interviews show that there is a strong sense of giving back to the community and a deeper need to serve the needs of the community, which goes beyond the personal ambitions of the women through their participation in the RPS. As W3 says, *"I basically wanted to know what was going on around me, I wanted to help my community as much as I could through these projects. What our right are, what we are obliged to do as members of this community and as individuals on our own. That was the reason why I participated, I wanted to learn things!"*, W1 claims, *"I wanted to learn some basic things about politics. I wanted to know how I could ask the municipality or the local community to do something in my Roma community, I wanted to learn some basic things"* and W4 states, *"I am involved in the public life, and I am very interested in upgrading our race."*

In addition to the politics-related topics, one reason for participation for two of the interviewees seems to have been their previous acquaintances with some program organizers who had made a positive impression on them, and they are still in contact. W2 stated *"I participated in the program because I knew 'X', from a previous program. She is a great person, she is a person with great values..."* and W3 claimed *"I mostly wanted to participate, because I knew 'X' and we work together, we are friends above all. This is why I wanted to support the project more."*

W2 also highlights the importance of promoting positive role models and behaviors in order to serve as an example to individuals in the community and to enhance their participation and contribution to the public life and the community: *"When projects take place, and you are involved in the public life, you have to set an example for others to follow. I have plenty of experience with these projects and this is a given for me. In order to give the lead to other women and girls you have to serve as an example for them to follow."*

Regarding the participation rate of women in the RPS, all interviewees consider it sufficient, but W2 again points out that Roma women are limited in the assumptions and roles they can take on due to Roma perceptions and stated that they need a vision and that small and steady steps need to be taken to break the stereotypes that limit them. *"There was sufficient female participation compared to other programs I have attended where male dominance is usually predominant. I don't want to look at it from a feminist point of view, but it was a head start and I liked it. Women want to be empowered and break the perception that 'you're a woman and you can't do anything'. It was a small but important step. Usually, a small result follows high expectations. I believe that all this effort should continue. Women should be mobilized, and, in the future, there should be no need for mediators or anything. Women on their own should be active citizens."*

#### **4.1.2 How to make use of the knowledge and skills acquired from the RPS**

When asked how they would like to use the knowledge gained from the RPS, two say they are interested in organizing activities in the field of education and civil society. In these areas they feel more comfortable, which confirms the fact that women are more familiar with specific areas. W1 states, *"I want to orient myself towards education because I think I can do things there. I think that I want to go into education because I believe I can do it. Of course, I have not yet been given the opportunity to do something, because I am bound by the*

*fact that I work in the municipality, and I am not so free. But I am thinking about doing things. First of all, I would like to create a club, because we don't have an active club in my area and, after that, we'll see what else I can do. But it's still the beginning, so I would like to continue the program and learn even more things."*

The aspirations of W4 lie in the same direction. She says that, by receiving more education, she can contribute to the field of education, but she also adds the professional dimension: *"I would definitely like to participate in education programs if I have the opportunity to do so, because I am also the president of a parents' association. I definitely want to participate in such programs because it will help me a lot. Beyond that, I also want to help people through the professional direction. These are my goals because I know that people need them."*

W3 states that she focuses on the organization of actions to support women and their rights: *"I will be doing a lot of activities after the end of the program because I work in community centers where we do a lot of actions, in terms of mediation, education, health or mobilization. A part that I want to work on, and I often work on is the claim of women's human rights."*

#### **4.1.3 Inhibiting factors - barriers to women's participation in educational/ political/ professional and other activities**

The dominant themes that emerge from the interviews regarding the inhibiting factors to the general participation of Roma women in the community and in other activities are: the family, the stereotypical perceptions of the position of women that prevail in the Gypsy community, the low educational level and the lack of self-confidence on the part of women.

W3 refers specifically to how women's participation in activities outside the home can be affected, as in some cases they are not allowed by the family to move outside the community and the intervention of third parties is necessary in order to guarantee and convince the family. *"Imagine that there were two mediators from the Kapodistrian University who had been placed on the bus as attendants, and it was the first time we had to take them to a seminar. They were not allowed to come all the way to Athens. We had to do a whole negotiation with their husbands, their in-laws"* (W3). W2 raises the issue of stereotypes and community resistance in relation to participation in the public sphere as a woman and particularly on the part of older Roma men. *"Here in the community, there are many clubs where usually male dominance prevails. There are also some gypsy leaders who don't want to accept women's participation and will always find a reason to pull you down."* However, she points out that things are slowly changing, as, while in the beginning women experienced racism and were challenged *"now men are coming to women wanting cooperation"* (W2). W3 mentions as an inhibiting factor the low level of education and lack of self-confidence of some Roma women both at the professional level and the political level. She mentions that women who have graduated from primary school are mostly unable to participate in opportunities that are available to them, at least in her own community, but there are exceptions. *"Do you understand what it is like for a girl who has only graduated from primary school to go abroad in*

*order to represent us?... Some of them are so deserving, of course, that they don't need to...But their inner self won't let them go that far because they feel disadvantaged" (W3).*

#### **4.1.4 Roma women's proposals for the empowerment of women and the strengthening of their active citizenship**

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed the following themes in relation to women's suggestions for measures/factors that could strengthen their active citizenship: information and the dissemination of information, the enhancement of women's participation in associations, women's participation in education and adult education - such as SDEs, the availability of educational opportunities in specialized political programs, the breaking down of stereotypes about women's status, the assistance on the part of women already involved in the community, the interaction with non-Roma communities.

In particular, W1 states: *"First of all I would say that information is very important. Roma women do not know what politics means, what should be done, what you should do. So first of all, I would say that some women from each community should be educated. There should be a corresponding participation of women (quota) in the associations...that is, the associations should start to include women. They should be educated and then, I think that some women can find the strength to express themselves, this knowledge that they didn't have so that they can use it in order to claim things. To eliminate this stereotype that women can't do anything, that women don't know anything because they don't work, and they are just housewives. To change all that. "W4 states: "Women who are already in positions of power should demand that women be helped through programs, given opportunities, shown the way, whatever it is. They should come out, because some women do have power but don't have the means to do it. They're restricted by the state, by their surroundings... For that to change, women have to demand it. And they have the power to do it. It was important that the second chance school was established. I jumped for joy when it happened. For me it was the best thing ever. I mean, things like this should be done in order for women and Roma people to have a chance to step forward, because we are very marginalized. There are people from our race who want to get ahead but are not given the opportunities". W4 states that the female representation in the political arena may be small, but it is dynamic and shows the way for other Roma women to become active in the field. She argues, "Of course there are women and I see that there are even more of them. There are not many of them, but they are very strong. Those who are at the front are strong. And as we go on, new girls, new women are coming out..." (W4).*

W2 identifies as a primary issue the breaking down of stereotypes as far as the position of women is concerned and the creation of channels of communication with the wider society in order to create relationships with non-Roma and to help Roma adopt more positive perceptions of the world outside the community. She says that, in her view, Roma should start living in communities that are not purely Roma in order for interaction with other people and development in the areas of education and health to occur. *"I think that, in order to eliminate some things in our culture, we should not all live together in one community. We need to disperse until women, but more importantly men, see how society works,*

*how the outside world works, how it is to live with non-Roma, to open their minds. So, I think that things can change, and women can be the way they should be. That's the first thing that has to be done for me. If you disperse, of course, you will keep your customs and your culture, but you need to get out a little bit, in order to see how the world works. You will be more open-minded when it comes to education, but also when it comes to health [...] some people don't know anything about hygiene. They don't have any knowledge; they are not educated at all. A woman here in the Roma community is only familiar with hospitals, prisons, and such places. She doesn't know how the world works outside. Okay, here things may be better than in other settlements like Hagia Sophia, Chalastra, and other places in Thessaloniki. There, things are very difficult" (W2).*

## **4.2 Interviews with Council of Europe officials**

### **4.2.1 Roma Political Schools (RPS) objectives and Roma participation**

According to the data from the interviews with Council of Europe officials, there is a major change in the participation of Roma women in Council of Europe education programs, including Roma Political Schools.

The main benefits of the Roma Political Schools for the participants and the aims of Roma Political Schools are multiple. The RPS seeks to empower participants to become active shapers of the political process that concerns them, taking political positions at all levels in order to help their communities and to break down stereotypes of non-participation in public life. As O1 states, *"I think the main benefit is to work directly with people that have the potential to become strong leaders and effective actors of change. And another benefit that I think it's important as well is to deconstruct to the mainstream community the myth that Roma do not participate or that Roma are not active in the society for their communities or for the mainstream community".* O2 says, *"This School targets to a population that is very visibly discriminated, so for us the main objective with the political participation is to boost the participation of Roma, to support their preparation for this political participation and this is to have more that Roma being present not only in institutions on every level, local, national, but also can be elected and be themselves, be themselves by the local council, be themselves in the national parliament etc. So, if you have somebody from the Roma community in that place you can represent your community and your priorities of your own community".*

O2 points out that the aim is not only to acquire knowledge but also to activate them as citizens in order to awaken communities, defend their rights and prevent them from being manipulated by those in power. He mentions that *"to become responsible citizens in order to ensure that there is a type of not only knowledge but awakening in certain communities about the importance of not selling their goods, for instance, allowing to be intimidated before the elections and all those manipulative acts that happen very often with vulnerable people and happen also very often on Roma communities, so this is also to avoid this. So, it's not only to increase the number of Roma participating but increase their awakening and let's say citizenship awareness" (O2).*

Commenting on women's participation in the RPS, O1 states that it is a pillar of the schools to treat women equally and provide opportunities, even by assigning them the responsibility of the organization of the RPS. *"For us is crucial that in every school there*

*is this gender approach. Not just in the participation trying to achieve a gender-balanced group but we use this as a strategic approach as well” (O1).*

According to the interviewees, what emerges regarding Greece compared to other countries is that the participation of Roma women is satisfactory, but there is certainly still much room for improvement and strengthening of their presence. *“In Greece maybe it is a bit different [...] but also in the group here (in Greece) women have a very strong and active participation” (O1).* In order to strengthen the participation of women, a specific strategy is followed that does not focus on quantitative numbers but on the effective strengthening of their participation through the provision of quality opportunities for support and reflection in both Roma and non-Roma communities: *“We are aiming to enhance the participation and I don’t think it’s just a question of numbers and of percentages. It’s also in terms of the effectiveness of the participation, the quality of the opportunities that bringing to the Roma women. I think also this is not something that we can do without having a crucial and necessary debate within our societies, within the Roma communities themselves and all of these” (O1).* The gender dimension of the programs is also highlighted by O2 *“So we definitely pay attention to gender dimension in our programs. Not only in Roma but generally in the Council of Europe. But in Roma Travelers division where we worked and we have these Political Schools, we always have it in our action plan as very important topic and we are always looking in each and every program the participation of women”.*

#### **4.2.2 Factors for strengthening the active citizenship of Roma women**

The interviewees report that the factors influencing women's participation in politics are numerous and vary from country to country and region and are directly related to the socio-economic-cultural context. Strengthening women's participation in the RPS is of key importance, as it is recognized that Roma women lack opportunities and face more difficulties due to their gender, their low level of education, a lack of opportunities to participate in politics and their culture. All of the above are factors that affect their participation in public life.

It was mentioned that, *“In general in our Mediterranean societies Roma participate less or have less opportunities to participate in political decision making. This is changing but it’s still the case...So, first of all, there is the context in the society. Then it is the Roma culture that some of it might represent an additional difficulty for women to participate. But again also, these we perceive that is changing for better in many contexts. I think it’s very much attached to the will as well to the women to participate, and then we are seeing very powerful women and very powerful statements of will to participate, so I think there is a long road ahead there but it’s a very promising development” (O1).*

Strengthening the active citizenship of Roma women in various fields (education, society, politics) seems to be important. The strengthening of women's participation and retention in education is directly related to the participation of Roma women in public life. Roma women face many barriers that affect and hinder women's participation in politics, such as a low level of education, Roma perceptions of women and a lack of opportunities and participation at multiple levels. However, the presence of Roma

women in the RPS is strong presence, their 'voice' is heard and there is a tendency to participate in Council of Europe projects. O2 mentions that, *"In general the participation of women is very low in politics...Especially, if we have as we know very well in the Roma community the degree of education is very low, the participation in education and in general they suffer more in lack of participation in all the fields. So, this is not a surprise, that Roma women participate less than Roma men [...] But there are a lot of Roma women that participate in our programs so there is a change there a indeed, despite the fact that we still have big numbers of Roma that leave school or less that finish higher education, we still have a lot of women looking around that are very vocal, very outspoken"*.

The participation of Roma women in every program is of great value and in order for this to be achieved, there must be an appropriate approach, which varies according to the case. More specifically, in order to ensure the participation of women, O1 states: *"Then you have to do everything you can for women to apply"*. Meaning you have to offer the space and the opportunity, because it depends on how you to present things, how you advertise things, how to invite people to sit with you. You can organize something such a meeting, you can speak with them etc. There are many ways you can do it and if you do it and you see no success with these, I said you can come up with other [...] And then the situation started to change because they didn't even think. For them, it was easy to say "nobody applied".

It is aptly commented that the RPS seeks to change the perception of the Roma about the role that women can play in the public sphere and to highlight their role in the public sphere, as this is undeniable within their own communities: *"...to continue to propose to Roma communities to debate this, to change this, what are the best strategies to change this. One of them might be these political schools, one of them might be to give more visibility to the good work that Roma women are already doing to the level of public sphere. I don't think anybody has doubts about the crucial role that Roma women have in their own communities. The other thing is also how we give visibility to it and how we value some of these as well"* (O1).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

In relation to the first study question concerning the reasons for Roma women's participation in the RPS, it was revealed that Roma women participated in order to gain practical knowledge about their rights, to learn about political processes, to develop skills in order to participate more actively in public life and to promote the demands of their communities, while one of them seeks to prepare herself to participate as a candidate in the elections. An important reason for participation that emerges is the urgent need to support initiatives that empower women, young people and adults seeking second chances. Particular reference is made to supporting women, who in the view of the research participants experience multi-vulnerability both as members of the Roma minority group and as women, which is in line with what is reported in the relevant literature (Liegeois, 1994; European Commission, 2010; FRA, 2019). While the primary goal of women is to improve their position and become positive role models, there is also a strong need for them to become active in politics in order to serve the needs of their

community. Roma women do not aim to participate in politics to fulfill their personal ambitions, but to resolve problems in their communities.

Through the reasons for participation, it also emerges that appropriate educational approaches and the educational context of non-formal education seem to be important elements for their participation in the program (Vassileiadou & Pavlis Korres, 2011; Pavlis Korres, 2017; Liegeois, 1994). Participants cite as a reason for their participation their previous acquaintances with organizers they had met during previous programs and who had made a positive impression on them, while Council officials confirm that in order to include Roma women in the programs, appropriate approaches must be adopted, which vary depending on the case.

As far as the participation of Roma women in the RPS program is concerned, it is considered satisfactory. The above conclusion is confirmed by both the two Council of Europe keynote speakers and women themselves. The participation of women is not surprising as there is similar evidence in the relevant literature of their increased participation in non-formal adult education programs. Non-formal education has emerged as an innovative and flexible educational process (Rogers, 2004), which adapts to the needs of the learner and can have multiple benefits and outcomes especially for vulnerable groups including Roma (Vassileiadou & Pavlis Korres, 2011; Pavlis Korres, 2017). According to (Papakonstantinou, Pavlis Korres, Ladopoulos, 2021, p. 1202) *“non-formal education is able to provide appropriate opportunities for the development and improvement of women’s lives; it can even transform their views and provide opportunities, knowledge and skills to improve their position in society and fulfill their personal aspirations.”*

Out of all the participants in the study, it is noted that women have a very strong will to participate in projects, and to become more active and there is a promising change in attitudes and perceptions.

Regarding the second study question on how to use the knowledge and skills acquired from their participation in the RPS, women state that they would like to organize actions in the field of education, civil society and especially support for women and women's rights because they feel more comfortable, which confirms that women are familiar with specific areas. Women's orientation towards actions related to education is possibly linked to their decisive role in the upbringing of children (Pavli-Korres et al., 1991; Fraser, 1992; Liégeois, 1994). Their orientation towards actions in support of women's rights is in line with Quamruzzaman and Lange (2016, p.5) who claim that, according to studies, *“... female politicians, on average, are more in favor of policies addressing gender inequities and social welfare. Gender differences in support of female-friendly policies likely result from the fact that women experience gender inequities first-hand and are therefore more aware of their presence and consequences”*. Similarly, Devendra (2001) stresses that women's empowerment should focus particularly on their health, education, and self-esteem so that women can cope with difficulties, participate in decision making, policy formulation and implementation of actions that affect them. It is worth noting that one participant stated that she wants to prepare herself to run for election.

It is evident that the participants of the study expect that the participation of women in the RPS will have as a result their active citizenship in its broad sense, as defined by the literature [European Commission, (1998) & European Council (2000) in Hoskins, 2009; Hoskins, 2006]. Moreover, these women's aspirations are in line with the objectives of the RPS and the Council of Europe which seek to empower participants to become active shapers of the political process that concerns them, by assuming political office in order to help their communities, gain knowledge and awaken communities to defend their rights and avoid manipulation by those in power. The emancipation of Roma and their critical awareness through their participation in RPS is in line with Freire's (1970) pedagogical approach concerning the empowering and political potential of education, which links learning to social change. Through their critical awareness, learners can create the conditions for self-management of their lives, link knowledge to power and its mechanisms, and learn to read not only words but also the world as part of a larger struggle for justice and democracy.

The Roma women that participated in the study all had a high level of education compared to Roma women in Greece. They confirm what Mandal (2013) mentions in relation to the role of education in the acquisition of self-confidence, self-esteem, self-sufficiency, overcoming stereotypes and prejudices, and the cultivation of social, political, spiritual, cultural and religious awareness.

Regarding the third study question, the main inhibiting factors-barriers identified by both women and Council of Europe staff are the Roma culture and their stereotypical perceptions of the status of women, the low level of education of Roma women and their lack of self-confidence (Mandal, 2013). Sorde (2006) states that the low 'academic' achievements of Roma women are among the most important barriers to their social integration, while other researchers emphasize the contribution of education as a powerful weapon for changing women's position in society (Papakonstantinou et al., 2021; Shetty & Hans, 2015). The Council of Europe officials also add the lack of opportunities for women's involvement in public life due to gender, while underlining that the inhibiting factors affecting women's participation in politics are numerous and vary from country to country or from region to region and are directly related to the socio-economic-cultural context, confirming what is mentioned in the relevant literature (European Commission, 2010; Pavlis Korres, 2017, 2018; Liegeois, 1994; Crowley, Genova, & Sansonetti, 2013). In addition, according to a study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014), early marriage, childbearing, the number of children and the lack of housing makes Roma women particularly vulnerable.

The main proposals that emerged in relation to strengthening women's participation in politics are related to the empowerment of women on multiple levels - educational, social and political- and their provision with opportunities to participate in various programs. In particular, it was suggested that there be further information and dissemination of information at all levels (educational opportunities and actions, rights, etc.), that women's participation in associations, education, adult education and specialized policy programs be strengthened.

The issue of women's education is considered pivotal, and in line with the literature as it is directly related to the roles they assume early on in the family (Liegeois 1994; European Commission, 2010; Pavlis Korres, 2018) It is interrelated and interdependent with other key areas as well, such as housing, health and employment, affecting the reality of Roma in Greece, just as the socio-economic situation of Roma affects their own education (Pavlis Korres, 2017). In this direction, the Council of Europe officials add that it is necessary to ensure the participation of women in the various educational programs. Therefore, the best practices should be used, and women should be provided with equal opportunities, even by assigning them the responsibility of the organization of the activities. The increased participation of Roma women in the Council of Europe programs and their dynamic presence in the RPS is proof of their will to claim and improve their position.

As a conclusion, we can claim that Roma women, through the important role they play within the family, which is the basis of their social organization (Liegeois, 1994; Pavlis Korres et al., 1991; Pavlis Korres, 2018), already participate in the social life of Roma communities in their own way. Expanding their role in the public sphere and strengthening their active citizenship at a local, national, and international level can be significantly improved through the action of women pioneers, such as those involved in the RPS, who act as role models, through the creation of women's associations and through the education of Roma women and men, which can contribute to the transformation of perceptions regarding the position and empowerment of women.

## **6. Recommendations**

The results of the present study can contribute to the understanding of the conditions and factors that hinder the active citizenship of Roma women and can be taken into account in the development of strategies by institutions dealing with Roma issues. The active citizenship of women should be approached holistically, through its integration into the socio-economic and cultural context of each Roma community. It is evident from the research and the relevant literature that the education of Roma girls and women can lead to their empowerment and the strengthening of their position in public life at a local, national, and international level.

Bearing in mind the limitations of the present study (limited number of participants with a high educational level compared to Roma women in Greece), we believe that conducting a nationwide study could significantly enrich the data for recording the situation regarding the active citizenship of women in Greece. It would also be of interest to investigate the views of Roma men on the issue, as well as a comparative study between different countries, as it could highlight good practices and educational programs in order to strengthen the active citizenship of both genders.

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