

Introduction to the Special Issue on the Gender Dimension of Minority Policies

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The intersection of gender and minority rights has increasingly become a central concern in the broader field of human rights. Historically, since the adoption of international minority rights instruments in the 1990s and afterwards, the rights of persons belonging to national minorities were primarily addressed from a perspective that focused on preserving the cultural, linguistic, and religious identity of persons belonging to national minorities, as well as on assuring their representation and participation in public life. In the same way, the realization of women's rights and gender equality has been treated as a separate domain of human rights for a long time, primarily aimed at challenging systemic inequalities between men and women in various socioeconomic and political contexts.

However, it is now widely recognized that minority women occupy a unique intersection of vulnerabilities, facing compounded challenges that arise from their identities as women and members of minority groups. Among both practitioners and academics dealing with minority rights, the importance to address gender inequality within national minority communities has gained traction due to growing awareness of the specific and overlapping forms of intersectional discrimination faced by women belonging to certain national minorities. While all women experience gender-based inequalities, minority women often bear the additional burden of marginalization due to their race, ethnicity, language, religion, cultural identity, migration status, or socioeconomic status. In some minority communities, traditional gender roles and cultural practices – such as

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early marriages – hinder minority girls' access to education and long-term empowerment. Minority women, particularly Roma women, often face gender-based violence exacerbated by systemic economic inequalities, discrimination, and lack of economic independence.

Examples of intersectional discrimination (ranging from education and employment to accessing healthcare and political participation, as well as increased vulnerability to violence) that impact every aspect of minority women's lives have been more and more addressed and researched in academic publications so far. What is, then, the novelty of the present Special Issue? At its outset, the issue acknowledges the significant progress made in the area of gender equality, particularly through the efforts of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The United Nations considers gender equality both as a fundamental human right and as a requirement for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. Indeed, since the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, gender equality is recognized as a cornerstone of international human rights. The CEDAW international women's rights framework was reaffirmed by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which, thirty years after its adoption, still sets a framework for achieving gender equality, the empowerment of all women and girls, and the full enjoyment of their human rights globally. In September 2015, under the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, all UN Member States adopted 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). The organization's commitment to gender equality is underlined by placing gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls as one of the SDGs. UN Member States should aim for specific actions or outcomes that remove discriminatory legislation and social norms, eliminate gender-based violence, ensure the bodily autonomy of women and girls, value their unpaid care work, and close gender gaps in access to resources and decision-making. These goals should encompass women from national minorities too and should be transposed into national public policies, including those dealing with the implementation and realization of minority rights.

At the international level, gender equality in national minority communities is advancing by promoting legal and policy reforms, disaggregated data collection, and targeted interventions to combat systemic inequalities through the work of the (monitoring) bodies of international organizations, as well as in their institutions and field operations. Since 1999, the OSCE has been at the forefront of this intersectional approach. Based on its commitments on human rights, gender equality is promoted as a goal that contributes to comprehensive security. Both the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and the OSCE Secretariat's Programme for Gender Issues emphasize the need to prioritize the rights and well-being of minority women. Their initiatives highlight the importance of addressing gender-specific challenges, of promoting the participation of women belonging to national minorities in public and private life, of taking steps necessary to counter the intersectional discrimination suffered by minority women, and of ensuring minority women have equal access to services. All of the efforts enumerated above made by the international human rights organizations presuppose a stance that advancing gender equality for minority women is not

just a matter of human rights and equality, but also a prerequisite for peace, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Gender mainstreaming has become recognized in the international organizations as a gendered perspective that needs to be applied, implemented, monitored, and evaluated in gender-responsive normative frameworks, policies, programming, human resource management, and leadership, in all areas and at all levels. The gender mainstreaming approach has helped the integration of gender equality into minority protection frameworks, the most advanced probably being the Council of Europe's. **Antonija Petričušić** and **Ana Horvat Vuković**'s article in this special issue, "Efforts to Mainstream Gender Equality in the Work of the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities," provides a detailed examination of this monitoring body's efforts to mainstream gender equality in its opinions. By analysing the efficacy of gender mainstreaming in the jurisprudence of the Advisory Committee, the authors argue that sustained efforts at the level of national policies are still needed to institutionalize gender equality in the context of realizing minority rights through action plans, gender budgeting, and capacity-building initiatives.

Intersectional discrimination compounds the effects of gender-based violence, as seen in the experiences of Roma women and girls. Cases such as *J.I. v Croatia* highlight the judicial system's failure to investigate violence reported by Roma women. The lack of an intersectional approach is also visible in judicial responses to Roma child marriages, while an analysis of policy documents shows how national bodies do not address intersectional issues effectively. In their paper "Fighting Intersectional Violence Against Roma Women and Girls – The Case of Croatia," **Maja Munivrana** and **Darija Željko Mrljak** argue for a holistic approach that includes stronger policies for prevention and protection, improved data disaggregation, and training for legal professionals. Their research underscores the need to implement the requirements of the Istanbul Convention, which provide a robust framework for addressing gender-based violence in intersectional contexts.

Employment barriers, including limited education and systemic discrimination, restrict minority women's economic participation. As a consequence, migrant and minority women often face precarious work conditions, limited access to capital, and structural barriers to entrepreneurship. **Valentina Vučković**, **Vlatka Škokić**, and **Ružica Šimić Banović**, in their article "Examining the Challenges of Migrant Women Entrepreneurs in the EU: Mind the Gaps!" show that although the overall share of immigrant entrepreneurs in the EU has nearly doubled over the past decade, significant disparities persist between Member States. Their results show that the key variables influencing the gender gap in immigrant entrepreneurship encompass economic, social, and institutional factors (labour market outcomes, regulatory framework, civil liberties, level of education, and economic development). The authors thus provide empirical evidence to support the development of policies that address social, economic, and institutional barriers to entrepreneurship, particularly for migrant women rebuilding their lives in host countries.

The underrepresentation of minority women in political decision-making remains a pervasive issue. Consequently, numerous minority women are excluded from political processes due to systemic barriers, cultural norms, and a lack of institutional support. **Sophia Schönthaler**'s article, "The EU National Roma Inclusion Strategy: A Window of Opportunity for Romani Women in Italy?" examines how the EU's Roma Inclusion Strategy framework offers opportunities for political engagement among Romani women. Despite acknowledging their inclusion, real political opportunities remain scarce due to gender imbalance, antigypsyism, and structural discrimination. Platforms for participation lack effectiveness, limiting Romani women's influence. However, grassroots movements and associations offer alternative advocacy channels. Schönthaler concludes that the strategy is primarily symbolic, urging policymakers to address intersectional discrimination and actively involve Romani women in decision-making.

Rimanté Jaugaitė's review of Karolina Lendák-Kabók's book, "National Minorities in Serbian Academia: The Role of Gender and Language Barriers" explores the challenges faced by female academics from Hungarian, Slovak, and Romanian minority groups in Vojvodina, Serbia, as they navigate their academic careers and contend with their absence from decision-making positions. Lendák-Kabók has employed an intersectional framework in the context of national minority women from Central and Eastern Europe, in this way illuminating the complexities of belonging, marginalization, and navigating dual identities in a nationalizing state. The book also examines the educational paths of minority students, highlighting their struggles with language barriers, which often lead to educational migration, brain drain, and systemic disadvantages among minority groups. It further analyses how these factors intersect with gender inequalities and national identity to create barriers for these women in higher education and academia.

By incorporating research from diverse contexts and by employing intersectionality as an analytical framework, this special issue aims to bridge the gap between gender and minority rights discourse. It includes contributions from scholars who examine the barriers to gender equality for women belonging to national minorities and minority women, propose evidence-based solutions, and assess the efficacy of national and international frameworks. Moreover, the authors in the present Special Issue jointly emphasize the importance of adopting even an more robust and systemic gender-sensitive approach to minority protection, and of effectively pursuing national strategies and action plans on measures to (also) promote gender equality and gender-mainstreaming in minority communities. By addressing key challenges such as intersectional discrimination, the lack of political participation and representation of women belonging to national minorities, and the barriers to economic and educational opportunities they face, the contributors to this special issue have offered actionable outlooks to the challenges that hinder the full enjoyment of women's rights by women belonging to national minorities and prevent the achievement of gender equality within minority communities and wider societies. The authors claim that through targeted interventions, inclusive policymaking, and multilateral cooperation, the rights of minority women and girls could be additionally

enhanced and empowered, paving the way for more equitable and inclusive societies. The assumption the present special issue establishes is that intersectionality is still not sufficiently addressed in national minority policies and that, in order to promote gender equality and prevent gender-based violence in minority communities, the intersectional approach should be applied more effectively.

On a final note, the fight for gender equality also needs to come from inside minority communities too. Therefore, the importance of the active engagement of men and boys belonging to national minorities is necessary in order to eliminate gender-based discrimination within minority communities and for addressing the root causes of gender inequality and violence towards women from national minority communities. Only by raising awareness about the impact of the negative attitudes, behaviours, and gender stereotypes that underlie and perpetuate discrimination and violence can those negative aspects be successfully targeted within minority communities. We hope that this special issue is going to inspire not only fellow researchers, but also policymakers and human rights advocates, to take concrete steps toward achieving the wider goal of gender equality.