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The EU National Roma Inclusion Strategy: A Window of Opportunity for Romani Women in Italy?

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Abstract

Policies are essential to improving the political engagement of marginalised communities, particularly minority women. This article examines the EU Roma strategy framework for equality, inclusion, and participation in Italy, focusing on its impact on Romani women and their perspectives. This article draws on legal documents, reports, declarations from Romani associations, and ten interviews with experts and politically engaged Romani women. The study employs political opportunity theory and political intersectionality to examine the extent to which the EU National Roma Inclusion Strategy serves as a “window of opportunity” for Romani women in Italy. First, the paper examines the newly-implemented EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion, and participation 2021–2030, focusing on the extent to which Romani women are considered. Second, the research examines the current political opportunities available to Romani women and explores the perceptions of these chances among politically-engaged Romani women. The findings indicate that although the National Roma Inclusion Strategy acknowledges the presence of Romani women, the availability of political opportunities for them remains scarce. Consequently, Romani women regard the opportunities the National Roma Inclusion Strategy provides as inadequate.

Keywords: intersectionality; political participation; Romani women; National Roma Inclusion Strategy

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Introduction

The second EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion, and participation was implemented in 2021 (European Commission, 2020). The National Roma Inclusion Strategy has five distinct objectives, four of which were vital priorities in the previous plan: work, housing, health, and education. One significant change to the previous National Roma Inclusion Strategy is the new objective of promoting participation.

The focus on political participation is an essential change of perspective as racialized minorities (Vincze, 2014) are often excluded and invisible in the political arena. When gender intersects with racialization and other individual or societal factors, the situation gets even more complex and barriers hindering access to the political arena can appear (Mantovan & Maestri, 2021). Although there is only a small population of Romani minorities in Italy (approximately 0.25% of the population), Romani people are presented as “criminals”, “illegals”, “invaders”, and “nomads” who are taking resources and are security threats (Kóczé, 2017; Pontrandolfo & Rizzin, 2021), and are very often not considered as a political subject.

In addition, women belonging to marginalised and discriminated minorities, such as Romani minorities,¹ encounter a variety of obstacles to political participation. Therefore, accessible political opportunities to make their voices heard are critical for political participation (D’Agostino, 2021).

Political participation in both the electoral and non-electoral arenas is significantly influenced by political opportunities. However, these opportunities do not automatically lead to change and political participation among Romani women. It is only when these opportunities are perceived and seized that political actors can truly make their voices heard (D’Agostino, 2021). Critically, policies such as the European Union Roma Inclusion Strategy have been called out for their lack of a gender-sensitive approach (e.g. Sanchis-Ramon et al., 2022), which has resulted in the omission of Romani women and a general lack of focus on the political participation of Romani people (Vincze, 2014).

In that context, the current National Roma Inclusion Strategy can open up new opportunities for the political participation of Romani women. Therefore, this study focuses on possible political opportunities stemming from the National Roma Inclusion Strategy and how experts and Romani women perceive those. The two central questions are:

- 1) To what extent does the National Roma Inclusion Strategy provide opportunities for political participation of Romani women?
- 2) How do Romani women perceive these opportunities?

Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to identify the opportunities and constraints (top-down) and to deepen our understanding of the perceptions of opportunities and factors for political participation for Romani women (bottom-up). This study is particularly significant as there is a notable knowledge gap regarding political opportunities for Romani women in Italy, and there is a lack of research on the perceptions used by politically-active Romani women in Italy. The results of this study can serve as a valuable foundation for further

research on the role of political opportunities and constraints for the political participation of minority women.

The article is structured as follows: First, the national context and the situation of the Romani minorities are described. Secondly, the article introduces two central theoretical concepts – political opportunities and intersectionality – as the theoretical basis of this research. Following an overview of the research methodology, the paper analyses the EU Roma strategy framework for equality, integration and participation adopted by the Italian Government. Finally, it addresses the perception of Roma women and the obstacles that obstruct the potential of the opportunities discussed.

1. Romani minorities and political participation in Italy

The Romani minorities in Italy are not a homogenous group but rather a diverse community. With an estimated 150,000 individuals, they represent around 0.23 to 0.25% of the total population (European Commission, 2023b). Approximately 50% of these Romani are also Italian citizens (Clough Marinaro & Sigona, 2011). This diversity is a key aspect of the Romani experience in Italy, and it is essential to recognise and understand it.

Evidence shows that while some individuals have been on the peninsula since 1400 (Clough Marinaro & Sigona, 2011), many arrived from the Balkans in the 1990s, while others have just arrived in the aftermath of the enlargement of the EU in 2007, mainly from Romania and Bulgaria. In simplified terms, one can identify three distinct groups: Roma, Sinti, and Caminanti. Many Roma arrived from the Balkans in the 1990s; the Sinti live mainly in the northern regions of Italy; and the third – the Caminanti – have been living in Sicily since the end of the 1950s (Clough Marinaro & Sigona, 2011). These differences are not only cultural and linguistic (for instance, in terms of language used), but also in terms of legal status: some are Italian citizens, others come from other EU countries, mainly Romania; others live in differentiated and precarious situations; others are stateless or are the children of stateless people.

Despite the presence for centuries of Romani minorities in Italy, they are not recognised as a linguistic minority. In the Italian legal system, the general concept of minority in Italy is linked to linguistic singularity and is founded and based on Article 6 of the Constitution.²

In a survey conducted by the Fundamental Rights Agency in 2021, 46% of Italian Romani people answered that they feel excluded from society (FRA, 2021). In that context, it is crucial to mention antigypsyism – a distinct type of racist ideology, which is at the same time “similar, different, and intertwined” with many other types of racism (Tosi Cambini, 2012, p. 17). Antigypsyism is used to justify the exclusion and alleged inferiority of Romani minorities and is based on historical persecution and negative stereotypes (Tosi Cambini, 2012). Romani women are the ones most affected by these dynamics: they face intersectional discrimination – because they are women and because they are Romani people.

When focusing on the data regarding different forms of political participation, survey results show that only 20% of Romani women answered that they participated in the last national elections (FRA, 2021). They are, however, more active than Romani men, of whom

only 14% answered that they voted in the last national election. Since 2010, there have been some positive developments in the political participation of Romani minorities, and of Romani women in particular. First, in civil society, Romani women have started to connect and organise themselves in associations. For instance, in 2011, some activists founded the Romani Women Network Italy.³ The primary goal was to connect Romani women all over Italy and to work towards common objectives, including better access to housing and education, reducing antigypsyism and gender discrimination, as well as recognition as a linguistic minority. Second, after decades of emergency initiatives and widespread institutional disengagement, Italy adopted the National Strategy for including Roma, Sinti, and Caminanti communities to provide a cohesive and unified approach to dealing with Romani minorities. In that context, Romani minorities are addressed as political subjects for the first time (Alietti & Riniolo, 2021). The recognition of Romani people as political subjects marked a change in Italy, where Romani minorities were considered primarily apolitical. Nevertheless, even though the formal objectives were to overcome the fragmented policy approach that dominated Romani policies, the results of the National Roma Inclusion Strategy (NRIS) were disappointing. Civil society actors highlight the failure to activate the beneficiaries of the Strategy regarding empowerment and participation in decision-making (European Commission, 2023a). Additionally, they stress that although the Strategy represents a crucial step – at least from a formal viewpoint – towards a coordinated approach, it has nevertheless failed to foster substantial and long-term changes (Alietti & Riniolo, 2021).

2. Theoretical framework: intersectionality and political opportunities

All citizens should have the opportunity to participate in politics and should have opportunities to do so. However, empirical evidence strongly suggests that many people, particularly those with a minority background, do not have a meaningful opportunity to participate (Parvin, 2018). Barrett and Zani (2014) apply an inclusive approach which considers political participation as every activity which intends to influence – or has an impact on – either regional/local, national, or supranational governance, either directly by affecting the creation or implementation of policies or indirectly by influencing the selection of individuals, who then directly engage (Barrett & Zani, 2014).

In order to understand the potential for political participation, this research draws from the “political opportunity structure” theory (POS) (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004), which addresses political opportunities for Romani women. The concept of political opportunities has propelled the analysis of macro-structural dimensions, considering the role of policies and political institutions in different groups’ mobilisation and political integration (Soehl, 2013). The idea that opportunities are crucial in shaping formal and informal political participation and mobilisation is quite common among scholars of social movements and contentious politics (Giugni, 2009). Scholars focusing on the political participation of ethnic minorities have mainly highlighted the importance of opportunities in shaping political participation at the individual level (Giugni & Morales, 2011).

American scholars have focused on the more volatile aspects of political opportunities, looking at the opening up “windows of opportunities” which may motivate collective actors to form or join social movements and carry out protest activities (Giugni, 2009). Here, the focus is on explaining the emergence or development of a given movement or movement cycle over time, based on changes in the institutionalised political system or the configuration of power (Giugni, 2009). This article analyses the National Roma Strategy as a potential window of opportunity for the political participation of Romani women.

In order to do so, I use intersectionality as a theoretical lens. The concept of “intersectionality” was coined by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to denote how race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Later, Crenshaw made a distinction between structural, political, and representational intersectionality. Whereas the first concept applies to individual experiences of inequality determined by the intersections of different categories, the latter captures the forms through which inequalities and their interaction are addressed in political and institutional strategies and struggles (Crenshaw, 1991).

Romani women are influenced by the intersection of various factors, including gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Kóczé, 2017). A new generation of Roma feminists adopting intersectionality in the European context outlines the need to replace “ethnicity” with “race” or “racialised minority”: to change the focus from presumed cultural characteristics to structural racism or, in other words, the processes through which Romani people are racialised and constructed as “the other” (Mantovan & Maestri, 2021; Kóczé et al., 2018). For Romani women, the intersection of racialisation and gender makes the situation more complex. Mantovan and Maestri (2021) outline that Romani women in Italy are specifically oppressed by marriage and maternity, as well as by the absence of public policies. They are, however, not passive spectators but active agents of change.

After pinpointing the macro-level perspective and how intersectionality is addressed in the NRIS, to obtain a better understanding of what opportunities exist and how the presumed beneficiaries perceive these opportunities, the aim is to build a micro-level perspective which allows us to consider the perceptions of political actors regarding their opportunities to participate in politics (Oliveira & Carvalhais, 2016). This understanding indicates that political opportunities must be perceived (D’Agostino, 2021) to unfold their full potential. As Gamson and Meyer (2012), among others, have pointed out, “an opportunity not recognised is no opportunity at all.” It is only when opportunity spaces are perceived and used as “good” and “suitable” arenas that political actors can make their voices heard and try to influence policymaking processes (D’Agostino, 2021).

3. Research design and methodology

This work is based on an exploratory and qualitative case-study research design⁴ (Yin, 2018). First, data were collected through five in-depth semi-structured interviews with Romani women active in formal and informal forms of political participation. Two of the women

interviewed are very active in associations and more formal politics. At the same time, the other three women are primarily active in more informal forms of political participation, such as activism. For the scope of this research, the decision was to focus on Romani women who are “visible” political actors well-known in the community. It is, therefore, important to outline that the author is aware of the fact that perceptions are different and can also be influenced by the position of power an individual has in her or his community – there is therefore no general or universal perception on opportunities. Second, five expert interviews with institutional representatives and individuals with inside knowledge were conducted to get insight into the policymaking process, as well as into the process of implementation of the Strategy. In addition to the interviews, offline and online events concerning the Roma National Inclusion Strategy are essential sources. Due to the shortage of secondary data on Italian Romani women’s political participation, other primary sources (such as associations’ and institutions’ websites and social media accounts of associations) were necessary for pinpointing the context of the analysis. Relevant policy documents, such as legislation, policy strategies, research reports, activists’ speeches, and position/opinion papers of Romani associations, have also been used to shed light on existing opportunities. The interviews were carried out in person or – if preferred by the interviewee – online on MS Teams.

For the interviews, the author used semi-structured interview guidelines. Before the interviews, informed consent was obtained and they were conducted in Italian, audio-recorded, and complemented by written notes. This article’s interview transcripts have been translated into English and pseudonymised. Finally, the author conducted a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2019) to systematise, analyse, and explore the interview using the qualitative content analysis software NVivo. The collected data were categorised in a coding frame, and codes were built deductively and inductively. The first set of codes focused on the National Roma Inclusion Strategy and the potential opportunities for political participation for Romani women. The second set focused on perceptions and constraints raised by the interviewees.

4. Political opportunities in the National Roma Inclusion Strategy

Racialised minority women have special needs and difficulties that require gender-sensitive policy approaches (Jovanovic et al., 2015) which are crucial to promoting women’s political participation. However, Romani women are often silent and invisible in data collection, research, and policy formulation (Jovanovic et al., 2015). The previous Strategy was strongly criticised for the lack of gender-sensitive policies (see Sanchis-Ramon et al., 2022) and for the lack of substantial impact by fostering single-strand policies and discouraging grassroots political action (D’Agostino, 2018). For instance, Sanchis-Ramon et al. (2022, p. 59) find that especially for the objective on housing, the Italian Strategy totally lacked a gender perspective. Overall, Sanchis-Ramon et al. (2022) find a significant distance between NRIS’s symbolic (theoretical) gender sensitivity and its operational (practical) gender sensitivity; they relate it to Mary Daly’s idea of double definitions of gender mainstreaming (2005). The following

section focuses on the potential of the current National Roma Inclusion Strategy as a “window of opportunity” for enhancing Romani women’s political participation.

Before addressing political participation, it is essential to determine to what extent the National Roma Inclusion Strategy recognises and incorporates Roma women into the Strategy. Currently, it greatly emphasises the empowerment of the Romani minority, both in general and with a particular emphasis on Romani women. The current Strategy addressed the “phenomenon” of intersectional discrimination: “it is important to acknowledge the specific needs or vulnerabilities of certain groups, including women, young people, children, LGBTI+ people, the elderly, people with disabilities, third-country nationals or stateless persons and Roma with non-Italian citizenship (NRIS, 2021, p. 3)”.

Hence, the starting point is to recognise that not all Roma are socially excluded, but all can experience discrimination and disempowerment. The National Roma Inclusion Strategy takes an intersectional approach, sensitive to the combination of ethnicity with other aspects of identity and how such intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination (NRIS, 2021). Nevertheless, the precise definition and implications of the intersectional approach mentioned in the Strategy are not explicitly articulated and remain vague. Also, most interviews outline that while there are good intentions, there is still a lack of knowledge on applying an intersectional approach in the actions deriving from the National Roma Inclusion Strategy. This lack of knowledge aligns with D’Agostino’s statement (2015, p. 96): that “political intersectionality is still in an embryonic stage in European policy making”.

While there is a lack of focus on intersectionality, the current National Roma Inclusion Strategy takes antigypsyism into account. Considering the work of Romani feminists who outline the need to focus more in-depth on processes of racialization, this is a significant change. Within this particular setting, there is a notable emphasis on harmonising the Strategy with other policy streams. For example, the European Union (EU) has implemented the Action Plan against Racism, which presents a chance to revive the discourse surrounding anti-discrimination matters inside the EU and within individual member states (NRIS, 2021).

Nevertheless, the National Roma Inclusion Strategy ignores the intersection of antigypsyism and gender-based discrimination. In other words, the main emphasis is on the combination of antigypsyism and awareness efforts on structural racism while ignoring the intersection of gender discrimination and antigypsyism. This leads to underestimating intersectionality concerning gender equality in the Italian National Roma Inclusion Strategy.

4.1. Romani women’s opportunities for political participation

The following section delves into the National Roma Inclusion Strategy to shed light on the political opportunities for Romani women. Overall, participation is a new and prominent objective in the National Roma Inclusion Strategy, but it is now crucial to look more closely at the opportunities outlined and the extent to which they can be considered opportunities for Romani women.

The third pillar of the National Roma Inclusion Strategy, referred to as “participation”, aims to guarantee the essential elements and degrees of involvement in the formulation, execution, and assessment of inclusive policies (NRIS, 2021). The National Roma Inclusion Strategy addresses the need for involvement beyond mere consultation and encompasses the active participation of Romani individuals as facilitators. There is, however, no reference to the need for the inclusion of women. The goal is to foster cooperation, mutual recognition, and legitimacy within these communities (NRIS, 2021). The Strategy also seeks to enhance engagement in national and local administrative initiatives about equality and social inclusion while fostering a sense of confidence.

Moreover, the National Roma Inclusion Strategy emphasises the importance of establishing operational approaches, consultation mechanisms, and avenues for participation to facilitate the empowerment of Romani communities at the grassroots level. The Strategy also aims to foster productive collaboration and shared responsibility in executing inclusive initiatives, mobilising communities and enabling their active involvement in local development endeavours that directly impact them. However, whether and to what extent women were and are included in this process remains unclear.

In Chapter Two, “Governance and Participation”, of the National Roma Inclusion Strategy, the focus lies on the importance of participation in society in general and on political participation in particular (NRIS, 2021). In detail, the National Roma Inclusion Strategy introduces a list of networks that should improve Romani women’s participation. For instance, section 4.1. “Capacity building, empowerment and participation” addresses political engagement, including specifically the participation of women:

Within this strategic framework, the intention was to continue and strengthen this approach by carefully identifying the target groups for empowerment measures. In line with EU indications, the need to actively support certain segments of the Roma and Sinti population, in particular “women” and “young people”, is clear and evident (NRIS, 2021, p. 75).

Here, it is essential to outline that while the focus in the previous National Roma Inclusion Strategy was on creating working tables, the objective of the new approach is “from tables to networks”. Hence, it emphasises the importance of forming multi-level and multi-stakeholder working groups, including representatives from the Forum of Roma, Sinti and Camminanti Communities (*Forum Rom, Sinti e Camminanti – Forum RCS*) and the National Platform RCS (*Piattaforma nazionale RCS*). These groups would investigate issues of high priority and focus on the successful implementation of the Strategy. These networks should encompass, for example, an “Observatory on Contemporary Forms of Antigypsyism” overseen by the National Contact Point, which places emphasis on “intersectional and multiple discrimination” and gives specific consideration to gender-issues (NRIS, 2021).

The current National Roma Inclusion Strategy places significant emphasis on enhancing the Platform and the Forum. The Platform is a functional tool for facilitating dialogue among stakeholders, including UNAR, several Roma and Sinti groups, the central public

administration, and local administrative authorities responsible for executing the Strategy. Seventy-nine associations are affiliated with the Platform, with over 20 being Romani or Sinti. Each association is entitled to designate one delegate to participate in the Platform activities, and there is no requirement for a balanced gender representation. Therefore, the Platform encompasses not only individuals belonging to Romani minorities but also representatives from other non-governmental groups actively involved in social inclusion (Interviewee 5, Representative National Roma Contact Point).

In 2017, the Forum of Roma and Sinti was founded (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2017). In contrast to the Platform, this particular group solely comprises associations representing the Roma and Sinti communities. Therefore, the Forum was established to create a platform facilitating dialogue between Romani and Sinti organisations and the National Office Against Racial Discrimination (UNAR – *Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazione Razziale*). The founding document includes a comprehensive list of 26 associations, including two dedicated explicitly to Romani women, namely “*Associazione Rowni – Roma women*” and “*Associazione Romni Onlus*”. There is no opportunity to participate in the Platform and Forum without being a member of these associations. Hence, associations and organisations are the only channels through which participation is possible. This outlines how crucial associations are for participation; but this also means that individuals not active in associations do not have the possibility to contribute to the Platform or the Forum.

The revised National Roma Inclusion Strategy 2021–2030 emphasises the Forum and the Platform’s capacity to serve as a mechanism for amplifying the perspectives of Romani communities. The interviewees outline that the Forum and the Platform show that the instruments lack an emphasis on ensuring the equitable inclusion of all segments within Romani communities. This shortcoming is also evident in the gender representation of the Forum: among the 26 members, there are only two women. Therefore, although the current National Roma Inclusion Strategy acknowledges the concept of intersectionality, the approach is missing regarding the equal representation of the Romani minorities in the Platform and the Forum.

Another aspect is the question of whether gender issues play a role in the Platform and the Forum. In that context, the representative of the National Contact Point stresses that themes specifically dealing with Romani women are becoming more relevant: “The Strategy had different lines of activity all dealing with Roma and Sinti; it had also, let us say, emphasised the aspect of women’s empowerment – there was a call for proposals for this type of action as well, in some cases projects were developed”⁵ (Interviewee 5, Representative National Roma Contact Point).

In general, the current National Roma Inclusion Strategy has demonstrated advancements in integrating the concepts of intersectionality, antigypsyism, and the inclusion of Romani women within political involvement. Hence, from this perspective, the current National Roma Inclusion Strategy seems to be a “window of opportunity”, at least for the introduction of issues which can lead to an increased awareness of some topics. In order to understand if it is also perceived as such by Romani women themselves, the next section will shed light on their perceptions.

4.2. Perceptions of political opportunities

Although the legal and institutional contexts determine the formal opportunities for Romani women's political participation, it is essential to acknowledge that there is always room for agency in how political actors perceive existing political opportunities or even the lack thereof (D'Agostino, 2021). Based on that, ethnic minority women can define their political strategies to overcome obstacles and become mobilised. The results show that the POS does not exert a homogeneous impact on all individuals, nor should it be understood as evident or self-evident for all individuals. The perception of macro-level opportunities is strongly influenced by intersecting factors such as gender, racism, or socioeconomic status. As a result, the POS does not create a typical response among all actors. The following section, therefore, shows the perceptions and central factors from interviews with Romani women and individuals working closely with the community, as well as reports by Romani women's associations and organisations.

Most interviewees highlight significant obstacles to the Strategy's potential as a "window of opportunity" for the political participation of Romani women, especially in the Platform and the Forum. First, there is a lack of sustainable representation because when the gender perspective is added, existing realities such as the Platform or the Forum become an even lesser opportunity for women. Interviewees outline the lack of female political voices in the Platform and the Forum stemming from the low representation of women in the Forum. One interviewee stresses that only two women are represented in the Forum, while the total number of members of the Forum is over 20, which leads to a substantial underrepresentation of women. An interviewee summarised Romani women's perceived lack of influence in the Platform and the Forum: "We do not influence at all" (Interviewee 3, Italian Romani woman). Hence, while the Forum and the Platform are critical to including Romani voices in policymaking and to discussing antigypsyism more in-depth, they still mainly overlook gender-related topics and fundamental goals to promote the substantial representation and participation of Romani women.

The second critique addresses the weak political power of the Platform and the Forum in general. It focuses especially on this weakness and, in this context, the claim that Romani minorities lack political influence in general. One interviewee stressed that the Forum has "no real political power" and that "a real political dialogue is still inexistent" (Interviewee 2, Italian Romani woman) in Italy.

Most of the interviewees stress that the most evident obstacle to participation is the intertwining of in-group and inter-group discrimination, which impacts Romani women's experiences. In detail, two forms of racism are crucial to address: the intersection of gender-based discrimination with discrimination within their communities, as well as antigypsyism or structural racism from the majority population. In that context, interviewees outline the existing patriarchal structures in the majority society, as well as in their communities, where women are discouraged from pursuing political or other careers. This also leads to

low socioeconomic power stemming from low levels of education. For Italy, Mantovan and Maestri (2021) find that early marriages are a central obstacle for Romani women. They can, therefore, hinder political participation because of a lack of economic and time resources. As a consequence, men are the ones active in pursuing a political career.

When patriarchal structures intersect with racist viewpoints from the majority group, this leads to a double obstacle; an interviewee describes this “intersectional discrimination” as follows:

In Italy, the fact that you are a woman is already an obstacle – so if you belong to mine, a minority (annotation from the author: Romani minorities) – to more than one minority⁶ – being Roma, being a woman, or you could be perfectly lesbian, as you could also be maybe a Muslim at the same time. (...) If there are more factors intersecting with your gender and your identity (...), it is much more complex to access politics (Interviewee 1, Romani woman Italy).

The quote highlights the importance of intersectionality for Romani women when discussing political activities. Only by taking into account overlapping and intersecting forms of discrimination from within and outside their communities can obstacles be better understood.

Interviewees outline that they evaluate the focus on antigypsyism as crucial, as they define this phenomenon as the root cause for the general exclusion of Romani minorities from social and political life: “It is important to note that antigypsyism still exists and, that it is, in fact, among the greatest obstacles to participation, and in general of minority protection” (Interviewee 3, Italian Sinti woman). Therefore, the focus on antigypsyism in the National Roma Inclusion Strategy can be described as a “window of opportunity” that could spill over into greater participation by Romani women. The focus and recognition of the existence of antigypsyism can foster a dialogue and could lead to greater general awareness in the society.

Despite the absence of “good opportunities”, the results show that Romani women are not inactive and use a variety of strategies to overcome obstacles. For instance, while more formal opportunities such as the Platform and the Forum are less accessible for Romani women, they are not inactive, but they overcome obstacles and engage in different activities and projects. One way to do so is, for instance, to connect with Romani women in Italy. The *Italian Romani Women Network* was an attempt to overcome obstacles by connecting Romani women all over Italy and to give a platform for gender-sensitive topics and projects. Also, Pérez-Bernal & Kittilson (2022) stress the role of women’s movements and women’s organisations in channelling their political participation and outline that “opportunities and incentives to participate in non-electoral participation are often shaped by grassroots movements at the local and regional level” (p. 563). The importance of these movements is also evident in the case of Italy. In addition, interviewees point out that Romani women are particularly active in projects: “Inside those projects, there are many Roma girls and women, I think they are the majority” (Interviewee 5, Representative National Roma Contact Point).

Associations play a crucial role in the connection between the macro and individual levels, as, for instance, their associations appoint the Platform and the Forum members.

This can already be the first obstacle for Romani women to seize positions of power, as the majority of Romani association leaders in Italy are male. Therefore, Romani women's organisations can be crucial in channelling Romani women's strategies and connecting individuals from different regions across Italy. This can also be a possibility for women in male-dominated associations who are voiceless and unable to put gender issues on the agenda to make these more visible.

Conclusion

One goal of this research has been to shed light on opportunities for the political participation of Romani women by focusing on the National Roma Strategy at the macro level. Indeed, the National Roma Inclusion Strategy highlights the importance of including Romani women in participation. The results show that despite some good intentions, the actual political opportunities for Romani women in the National Roma Strategy remain rare: while the National Roma Inclusion Strategy highlights the importance of the Platform and the Forum, there are no concrete strategies to include Romani women and to foster more equal representation. Hence, a significant gender-sensitive approach is still missing.

Therefore, the conclusions on this point are twofold. First, the current National Roma Strategy contains some elements that could be considered a first step towards an opportunity for Romani women but primarily, this opportunity remains only on paper; therefore, it does not hold the promise of a "window of opportunity". Second, as the associations appoint the representatives, this highlights their crucial role in enhancing Romani women's political participation. This shows the crucial role of associations in channelling political participation of Romani minorities, and Romani women in particular, but it also means that women not active in associations or who are in a powerless position are excluded from this opportunity.

The second goal of the article was to introduce the micro-level perspective, namely the perceptions of Romani women themselves. The results highlight that Romani women do not perceive the existing opportunities in the National Roma Inclusion Strategy as accessible. In that context, discrimination, and especially the intersection of gender discrimination with structural racism and individual factors such as socioeconomic status, is considered a central obstacle to participation. However, while the focus on intersectional discrimination is missing in the Strategy, Romani women identify the focus on antigypsyism *per se* as a crucial step in the right direction towards recognising how structural racism hinders political participation. At the same time, the National Roma Inclusion Strategy fails to provide *ad hoc* political opportunities for Romani women.

Finally, we cannot understand political opportunities without considering these individual and bottom-up perceptions. Only when combining the two perspectives of top-down opportunities framed by the National Roma Inclusion Strategy and bottom-up perceptions by Roma women, can sobering results be arrived at: respondents very clearly indicate that these opportunities are not yet fully perceived as "good" because they are often not perceived as such by Romani women. For a better and more effective implementation of the existing

and future National Roma Strategy, it is therefore crucial to acknowledge and address more deeply the intersections of different forms of discrimination Romani women experience. Only by considering these obstacles derived from Romani women's personal experiences can the opportunities presented in the National Roma Strategy become opportunities accessible for Romani women. Thus, it is necessary to actively include Romani women in all stages of policy-making up to its implementation, and to ensure balanced representation.

Endnotes

- 1 Following Sardelić (2021, p. 21), I use Romani minorities to emphasise the heterogeneity and hybridity of this particular minority identity. The notion of Romani minorities also includes individuals who do not identify as Roma (such as Sinti, Ashkali, Egyptians, Manoush, Gitano, and Travellers, among others) but are externally categorised either as Roma or as Gipsies (Sardelić, 2021).
- 2 Law no. 482 of 15 December 1999, protecting linguistic-historical minorities, recognises and protects twelve linguistic minorities: Albanian, Catalan, Germanic, Greek, Slovenian, Croatian, French, Franco-Provençal, Friulian, Ladin, Occitan, and Sardinian (taking into account linguistic-historical criteria but especially the criterion of territoriality, in other words, localisation in a given territory)" (Senato della Repubblica, 2023).
- 3 More information on the network can be found in their Facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/ROWNI2014/>
- 4 This research is part of a PhD project. The fieldwork took place between January and April 2023.
- 5 All interviews in Italy have been translated from Italian to English by the author
- 6 The interviewee refers here to Romani women as a "political" minority.

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