



IRCA Equality, Inclusion & Human Rights Policy

Inclusion and equality in the workplace are not only principles of fairness, but also drivers of innovation, collaboration, and sustainable growth, where every individual's voice and potential are valued.

Preamble: who we are and why this policy matters

The Institute of Romani Culture in Albania (IRCA) is a civil society organization founded on **1 July 2011** with a clear public purpose: to empower Roma communities and other marginalized groups to enjoy equal rights, shape decisions that affect their lives, and participate in Albania's civic, cultural, and economic life on equal footing. From the outset, IRCA's external vision has been that Roma communities are meaningfully represented and engaged at every level of public decision-making; its internal vision has been to serve as a leading advocate for a multi-ethnic, inclusive society rooted in universal human rights and equality. Its mission brings these visions to life through advocacy, mobilization, empowerment, collaboration, policy research, and participatory action aimed at equal democratic participation, fair access to services, and preservation of Roma culture and identity.

IRCA advances this mission through vibrant youth infrastructures — notably the **Romani Students' Network**, the **Romani Corps of Volunteers**, and the **Romani Youth Parliament Forum** — as well as public-facing cultural and educational platforms that amplify community voices. The organization is governed by a Steering Board, supported by Goodwill Advisors, led by an Executive Director, and implemented by a professional team complemented by a **Romani Corps of Volunteers of 210+ members** across Albania.

IRCA's credibility rests on practice. In recent years the organization supported **ROMACTED** — an eight-year, Council of Europe and European Union initiative — in **10 municipalities** (Elbasan, Përmet, Gjirokastër, Fier, Korçë, Vlorë, Pogradec, Lushnjë, Çerrik, Roskovec), building inclusive local governance, small-grants management, and accountable services. IRCA has also promoted political participation and voter education, including a nationwide effort in **10 municipalities** to help Roma citizens exercise their democratic rights ahead of the

2025 Parliamentary Elections. At the same time, IRCA's cultural, educational, and social-protection projects reach deeply into communities — from **Romani language institutionalization** and cultural heritage initiatives to gender equality, anti-corruption, climate resilience, and digital safety for youth — demonstrating that inclusion is both a right and a lived practice.

IRCA's **2024 membership in the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW)** further reflects its commitment to professional standards, evidence-based practice, and international collaboration in social work education.

This policy consolidates IRCA's values and practices into binding organizational standards. It protects rights-holders, guides staff and volunteers, aligns partners, and equips the organization to prevent, identify, and remedy discrimination and exclusion in every sphere of work.

I. Purpose and scope

This policy sets out IRCA's commitments and procedures to **advance equality, ensure inclusion, and respect, protect, and fulfill human rights** in all internal operations and external engagements. It applies to all staff, volunteers, consultants, board members, interns, and program partners; it governs every activity, from design and fundraising to implementation, communications, procurement, monitoring, and learning. Where IRCA supports or co-implements with public authorities or civil society organizations, this policy is a condition of collaboration.

IRCA's vision is solidarity in action, and IRCA stands for equal rights for all, irrespective of sex, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, social status, or cultural background. Guided by its principles, IRCA is committed to promoting human rights, advancing equality, and ensuring a fair distribution of power and resources between all individuals, with particular attention to marginalized groups such as the Roma community, women and girls, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations.

II. Values and principles

IRCA's work is anchored in dignity, equality, non-discrimination, participation, accountability, transparency, and cultural respect. In practice, this means centering the lived experiences of Roma communities; addressing intersecting inequalities related to ethnicity, gender, age, disability, socio-economic status, migration status, sexual orientation and gender identity, and place of residence; and building **shared power** with communities through youth leadership, cultural co-creation, and community-driven solutions, as reflected across IRCA's programmatic pillars and public initiatives.

III. Legal and normative framework

IRCA's obligations derive from Albania's Constitution and laws on equality, gender equality, social protection, and child protection; the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** and core UN treaties; the **European Convention on Human Rights**; Council of Europe and EU acquis on non-discrimination; and sectoral standards on safeguarding, disability inclusion, and data protection. Where domestic and international standards diverge, IRCA strives to meet the higher standard consistent with Albanian law.

IV. Organizational Context: IRCA's Pathways to Inclusion

IRCA's commitment to equality, inclusion, and the respect of human rights is operationalized through a multidimensional and systemic approach. The organization recognizes that social exclusion is not a single-layered phenomenon, but rather the outcome of structural inequalities, institutional gaps, and discriminatory practices. Therefore, IRCA's pathways to inclusion are designed to address multiple levels simultaneously: individual, community, institutional, and systemic. These pathways serve as the foundation upon which this Equality, Inclusion, and Human Rights Policy is built.

Inclusive Local Governance

IRCA works with municipalities to institutionalize inclusive planning and decision-making. Within the framework of programs such as ROMACTED, the organization has strengthened municipal capacities to integrate Roma inclusion into policy and budget cycles. By fostering accountability mechanisms, piloting small grants that promote joint projects, and embedding equality considerations into service delivery, IRCA ensures that local governance systems become more responsive to the needs of marginalized groups. This approach not only creates immediate benefits but also establishes long-term institutional pathways for mainstreaming equality.

Democratic Participation

Participation in democratic life is central to IRCA's mission. The organization designs civic education initiatives for youth and first-time voters, facilitates political awareness campaigns, and organizes forums such as "Roma Talks" that amplify marginalized voices in public discourse. Through internships within institutions and targeted voter outreach, IRCA equips communities with the knowledge and confidence to exercise their democratic rights. This dimension of work reduces barriers to participation and cultivates an active citizenship culture.

Gender Equality and Protection from Violence

IRCA recognizes that women and girls, particularly within the Roma community, face compounded vulnerabilities. Through initiatives such as AGORA, which enhances oversight of gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV) responsiveness, IRCA works to strengthen institutional accountability and service accessibility. Partnering with diplomatic missions and international organizations, IRCA promotes gender equality by advancing women's rights, improving access to justice and protection services, and fostering safe spaces for participation. This focus ensures that gender equality is not treated as an isolated goal but as a cross-cutting principle integrated across all programs.

Culture, Language, and Identity

Promoting cultural identity and linguistic rights is another key pathway. IRCA has positioned itself as a convener of regional stakeholders to advance the institutional recognition of the Romani language. By organizing cultural exhibitions, engaging artists, and mobilizing youth, IRCA challenges stigma while reinforcing collective belonging. These efforts not only preserve heritage but also transform culture into a tool for inclusion, pride, and resilience.

Digital Rights and Safety

Acknowledging the growing risks of digital exclusion, IRCA collaborates with different institutions to equip young people with the skills to navigate the digital space safely. Training

programs focus on data protection, prevention of cyberbullying, and strengthening digital literacy through a rights-based approach. By embedding digital rights into its broader inclusion agenda, IRCA ensures that vulnerable groups can benefit from technology while being protected from its risks.

Climate and Green Livelihoods

Inclusion is also linked to environmental sustainability. IRCA integrates climate resilience into its community interventions by combining education, art, and local action. Moreover, the organization supports Roma micro-entrepreneurs in developing green livelihoods, connecting environmental justice with social and economic empowerment. These efforts highlight that combating climate change must also address the inequalities that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups.

Institutional Engagement and Policy Influence

At the systemic level, IRCA collaborates with ministries, municipalities, and national strategies, including contributing to the National Strategy for Social Protection 2024–2030. The organization’s work is rooted in building partnerships across public institutions and civil society actors to align policies and services with human rights standards. This institutional engagement reinforces IRCA’s role as a credible partner and policy advocate, ensuring that national frameworks reflect the lived realities of marginalized communities.

These interconnected pathways reflect IRCA’s comprehensive vision of inclusion: a vision where equality is not limited to programmatic interventions, but is mainstreamed into governance, culture, digital transformation, environmental action, and institutional reforms. The mechanisms and standards outlined in this policy are therefore grounded in IRCA’s long-standing practice, ensuring coherence between principles and operations.

IRCA Gender Equality and Inclusion Policy

IRCA's Commitment

IRCA will strive to ensure that all individuals can fully access and enjoy their rights without discrimination based on gender identity. Women, on an equal basis with men, must have the rights, opportunities, and actual possibilities to participate in all spheres of society — socially, economically, politically, and culturally. To achieve this vision, IRCA will adopt and implement the measures described below.

❖ WITHIN THE IRCA ORGANISATION

IRCA aims, through recruitment, training, and capacity development, to build a staff that is committed and equipped to apply a gender perspective in all aspects of work, and that represents IRCA's values of gender sensitivity both on and off duty.

IRCA's personnel policies and ethical guidelines reinforce this commitment by ensuring a safe, respectful, and inclusive work environment. These include strict prohibitions on sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse. Within its organisational structures, IRCA will:

- Monitor and report the gender composition of staff across all levels.
- Promote women in leadership roles and strengthen gender balance in decision-making positions.
- Provide working conditions that meet the needs of both women and men, including parental responsibilities.
- Foster a workplace culture based on respect, dignity, and zero tolerance for sexual harassment or abuse of power.

- Create an inclusive, tolerant, and accepting environment that welcomes diverse gender identities and avoids discrimination against individuals who do not conform to binary gender norms.
- Establish effective mechanisms to identify, address, and follow up on cases of harassment, with clear protections for whistleblowers.
- Ensure that silence or complicity in cases of gender-based discrimination is not tolerated, and create safe spaces for dialogue and debate.
- Strengthen staff capacity on gender equality, human rights, and violence against women through continuous learning and awareness-raising.
- Encourage the active involvement of men in advancing gender equality, promoting shared responsibility in building a gender-sensitive organisation.

❖ IN PROGRAMME WORK

IRCA recognizes that gender equality is a prerequisite for inclusive and resilient societies. With a nuanced understanding of gender relations, the organisation can better address inequalities in access to power and resources.

1) Analysis and Practice

- All programmes will be grounded in gender-sensitive contextual and power analyses, tailored to the realities of each context.
- Gender perspectives will be systematically integrated into all phases of programme design: baseline assessments, planning, monitoring, reporting, and evaluation.
- Programmes will collect and use sex- and age-disaggregated data, with both quantitative and qualitative indicators.
- IRCA will identify and challenge unequal power relations that negatively affect women, men, girls, boys, or any individual based on their gender identity.
- All protection and social service programmes will adopt a gender-sensitive approach, ensuring equal access and impact across groups.

- No activity will be carried out in ways that discriminate on the basis of sex or gender.
- In conflict-affected or fragile contexts, IRCA will promote and apply the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, and its subsequent resolutions.

2) Participation

- Programmes must identify gender-specific barriers to participation, decision-making, and access to resources, and adopt measures to overcome them.
- Women and individuals facing gender discrimination must have real influence and meaningful participation, with specific dialogue mechanisms established to include them.
- Programmes will take into account the time burdens often placed on women due to domestic and care responsibilities.
- IRCA will engage both women and men in gender equality work, starting from their own perspectives, analyses, and strategies.
- Gender balance will be pursued in programme teams and fieldwork staff.
- IRCA will support women's organizing as a catalyst for structural change in gender relations.

3) Dialogue and Organisational Development

- IRCA will engage in constructive dialogue with all partners on gender equality, respecting each partner's pace and strategy for change.
- Gender equality will be systematically included in organisational development support, in line with partners' needs and priorities.

4) Learning

- IRCA will learn from the knowledge and experience of its partners, many of whom have strong expertise in gender equality.
- This learning will be used to strengthen IRCA's internal practice and to facilitate exchanges between partners.

- Programme evaluations will include gender-sensitive questions to assess differences in participation and impact for women and men.

❖ **IN POLICY, ADVOCACY, AND COMMUNICATION WORK**

IRCA will consistently work to advance gender equality through its policy, advocacy, and communications.

- Experiences and evidence from programmes will be used to influence laws, policies, and practices, aiming for systemic change beyond programme scope.
- IRCA will ensure the meaningful participation of women and girls in advocacy initiatives and use gender-sensitive, dignified language in all communication.
- Whenever possible, IRCA will apply sex- and age-disaggregated data to highlight:
 - Differences in the humanitarian and social consequences of crises for women, men, girls, and boys.
 - How inequalities shape the ways women and men are affected and involved in conflict, migration, or social exclusion.
 - Gendered differences in participation and influence in democratic processes.
 - Disparities in access to resources between women and men.

V. Policy statements

1. Equality and non-discrimination

IRCA prohibits discrimination in any form, direct or indirect, based on ethnicity, race, color, language, religion or belief, gender, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, disability, health status, marital or family status, socio-economic status, nationality or migration status, political opinion, or any other protected characteristic. Equality is a cross-cutting objective in every IRCA plan, budget, and partnership. This extends to equal pay for

equal work; fair recruitment and advancement; and equitable access to training, mentoring, and leadership opportunities within IRCA's structures and youth networks.

2. Inclusion and meaningful participation

IRCA recognizes Roma communities — including women, youth, elders, people with disabilities, returnees, and LGBTQI+ persons — as **rights-holders** and co-creators. Programs must be designed and reviewed with those most affected, using accessible formats and removing practical barriers (transport, childcare, timing, interpretation, assistive aids). The ROMACTED experience and election-readiness initiatives are references for participatory standards in public processes.

3. Cultural rights and language

IRCA commits to protect and promote Roma culture, arts, and language. Activities will respect cultural protocols, safeguard intangible heritage, and expand access to culturally competent services, consistent with IRCA's leadership on Romani language documentation and cultural programming.

4. Gender equality and freedom from GBV

Gender equality is integral to all IRCA actions. Programming must identify and reduce gender gaps in access, participation, and outcomes, and ensure safe referral pathways for GBV survivors. IRCA's ongoing GBV oversight and Roma women and girls' empowerment work provide baseline commitments for institutional accountability, prevention, survivor-centred support, and intersectional advocacy.

5. Child and youth rights

Children and youth benefit from additional safeguards. Projects must adhere to child-safeguarding protocols, safe recruitment for roles involving minors, and digital-safety measures in line with IRCA's cyber-awareness sessions and media-literacy projects. Youth are recognized as leaders and decision-makers across IRCA's networks.

6. Disability inclusion and accessibility

IRCA adopts universal design principles and reasonable accommodation. All venues, materials, trainings, and digital products must be accessible. Staff will apply accessibility checklists at design and procurement stages and will budget for accommodations.

7. Digital rights and data protection

Digital inclusion is part of equal participation. IRCA protects personal data; minimizes data collection; secures storage and transfer; and trains staff and volunteers on privacy, consent, and cybersecurity — reflecting its youth-focused digital safety practice.

8. Environmental and climate justice

Environmental sustainability is a rights issue. IRCA integrates climate risk analysis into project design, advances community resilience, and supports green livelihoods, in step with climate education and Roma micro-entrepreneur green initiatives.

9. Anti-corruption and accountable governance

IRCA rejects corrupt practices and strengthens transparency in public services and budgets, building on its anti-corruption and municipal-governance work. Staff and partners must disclose conflicts of interest, follow ethical procurement, and support citizen oversight mechanisms.

10. Safe, respectful workplaces

Harassment, exploitation, and abuse are prohibited. IRCA maintains a zero-tolerance stance on sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and provides confidential reporting, survivor-centred response, disciplinary procedures, and protections against retaliation.

11. Communications and representation

All external communications will uphold dignity and agency, use informed consent for images and stories, protect identities when required, and avoid stereotypes or sensationalism.

VI. Making it real: operational standards and procedures

A. Mainstreaming in the project cycle

Every concept note and proposal includes an equality and inclusion analysis; measurable outcomes disaggregated by sex, age, location, disability, and other context-relevant variables; risk and mitigation measures (including GBV, safeguarding, digital risks, and climate impacts); and a community participation plan. Monitoring tools capture qualitative change, not just reach, reflecting IRCA's practice of forums, dialogues, and youth-led activities.

B. Partnership due diligence

Before entering partnerships with public bodies or CSOs, IRCA reviews the partner's human-rights record, safeguarding systems, accessibility readiness, and accountability practices. Where gaps exist, capacity-building and clear improvement milestones are included in MoUs — mirroring how IRCA accompanies municipalities under ROMACTED to institutionalize inclusive practices.

C. Inclusive design and accessibility

Programs provide translation/interpretation (including Romani), sign-language or captioning as needed, plain-language summaries, accessible venues and transport support, childcare where relevant, and scheduling that accommodates precarious work or caregiving duties. Cultural protocols are respected in arts and heritage activities, with the Romani language mainstreamed where appropriate.

D. Safeguarding and PSEA

IRCA maintains a safeguarding framework covering children, youth, and adults at risk. All staff and volunteers sign a Code of Conduct; roles with contact with minors require background checks. Allegations are handled through confidential, trauma-informed procedures; referrals follow national protocols for GBV and child protection. Staff are trained annually; partners receive orientation as part of onboarding for joint programs such as AGORA and election-readiness efforts.

E. Human resources and fair opportunity

Recruitment uses inclusive job adverts, accessible application formats, representative selection panels, and skills-based assessments. IRCA invests in staff capacity — project coordination, M&E, fundraising, policy development — and leadership pathways for volunteers and youth, reflecting its institutional strengthening efforts.

F. Procurement and ethical supply chains

Tenders include equality and accessibility specifications; suppliers attest to non-discrimination, no child or forced labor, and environmental compliance. Weighted criteria favor inclusive and green solutions, aligned with IRCA's environmental and livelihood priorities.

G. Research, monitoring, and evidence

Studies and evaluations follow ethical research standards, including informed consent, protection of personal data, non-maleficence, and accessible dissemination. Learnings from culture, language, digital safety, and climate programs feed into organizational strategies and public advocacy.

H. Communications and visibility

Stories, images, and media products are co-created where possible; they emphasize rights and agency; and they follow consent protocols. Public events (e.g., “Voices of Inclusion,” exhibitions, forums) model participatory formats that foreground community voices.

VII. Roles and responsibilities

Board ensures policy adoption, resourcing, and oversight. **Executive Director** leads implementation, risk management, and partner alignment. **Program managers** integrate standards into designs, budgets, and M&E; they supervise complaint resolution and partner capacity-building. **Safeguarding and inclusion focal points** coordinate training, review risk registers, and track corrective actions. **All staff and volunteers** model respectful behavior and report concerns. **Youth networks and community councils** advise programs, validate findings, and co-design solutions — consistent with IRCA’s youth-empowerment architecture.

VIII. Grievance, whistleblowing, and remedies

IRCA maintains **confidential, safe, and accessible** channels for reporting discrimination, harassment, SEA, safeguarding concerns, and ethical breaches. Multiple entry points are provided: focal point, line manager, dedicated email/phone, and anonymous reporting. Complainants choose whether to pursue informal resolution or formal investigation. IRCA prohibits retaliation, offers referrals to specialized services, and communicates outcomes within privacy limits. Where harm is substantiated, IRCA implements survivor-centred remedies, organizational corrective actions, and proportionate sanctions.

IX. Risk management and incident response

Each project maintains an equality and safeguarding risk register, updated quarterly. Incident response plans include steps for **immediate safety, notification, confidential**

investigation, referral, and after-action learning. Digital risks (doxing, cyberbullying, data breaches) are addressed through prevention and response protocols aligned with IRCA's cyber-awareness practice.

X. Capacity-building and culture change

All staff, interns, and volunteers receive induction on this policy; annual refreshers cover non-discrimination, GBV/SEA, disability inclusion, cultural competence, digital safety, climate justice, and ethical research. Targeted trainings support managers and partners, drawing on lessons from ROMACTED, elections participation, gender oversight, language institutionalization, and climate programs to translate principles into day-to-day practice.

XI. Measurement, learning, and transparency

IRCA will track and publish (at least annually) progress on equality and inclusion outcomes: equitable participation and satisfaction; access to services; reduction of identified barriers; quality of institutional responses; safeguarding case handling times; and organizational diversity indicators. Disaggregated data (respecting privacy) will inform adaptive management, and learning will be shared with stakeholders through open events and reports, consistent with IRCA's practice of public forums and cultural showcases.

XII. Partner alignment

Memoranda with public bodies, universities, and CSOs will include compliance with this policy, joint training, shared reporting on inclusion outcomes, safeguarding cooperation, and accessible events and materials — reflecting IRCA's institutional collaborations (e.g., ROMACTED municipalities, ministries, universities, and EASSW-linked networks).

XIII. Resources and budgeting

Project and core budgets must allocate funds for accessibility measures, interpretation, community participation costs, safeguarding, inclusive communications, and learning. Donor proposals will articulate value-for-money not just in efficiency terms but in **equity** and **sustainability** terms, aligning with IRCA's strategic focus on women's economic empowerment, digital literacy, mental health, climate action, and anti-trafficking.

XIV. Entry into force, review, and amendment

This policy takes effect upon approval by the Board. IRCA will review it **every two years** or earlier if law or context changes, drawing on evidence from program evaluations and community feedback. Amendments are proposed by management, reviewed by the inclusion and safeguarding focal points, and approved by the Board.

Annex A. Key definitions (extract)

Equality is the state of enjoying the same rights and opportunities without discrimination. **Inclusion** is the active, intentional, and continuous effort to ensure equitable access, participation, and outcomes for all. **Intersectionality** recognizes that multiple identities and systems of oppression interact, shaping unique experiences of exclusion and privilege. **Safeguarding** means preventing and responding to harm, exploitation, or abuse of children and adults at risk, including SEA. **Accessibility** refers to the design of environments, information, and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without adaptation.

Annex B. Illustrative indicators (tailored to IRCA)

Participation of Roma women, men, girls, and boys in IRCA actions; accessibility uptake (interpretation, assistive aids, transport); satisfaction and perceived safety; number and timeliness of safeguarding reports addressed; municipal policy changes and budget lines for Roma inclusion; voter information reach and participation effects; green livelihood uptake; progress on Romani language standardization outputs; digital safety knowledge gains among youth.

Closing note

This policy translates IRCA's lived practice — from municipal governance to youth leadership, from cultural rights to digital safety, from gender equality to climate justice — into clear standards for **how** we work. It ensures that every IRCA action advances dignity, expands participation, and protects rights, in line with the organization's vision and the communities' expectations.

Reviewed by the IRCA Board:

- **Saimir Kazanxhiu**
- **Olesja Cili**
- **Blendina Bushi**

Approved by:

Bledar Taho-Executive Director

Date: 6.1.2025

