

# Red Notebook

of the Marry When You Are Ready European Project



Practical and Policy  
Recommendations  
to Prevent and Counter  
Early Marriage in  
Roma Communities  
in Europe

Marry When You Are Ready

Prandezer kama si o vaht

Sposati quando sarai pronta

Омъжи се, когато си готова

Fii Pregatita De Marialj

Udaj se kad si spremna

Heiraten wenn du bereit bist



Marry When You Are  
**READY**

[www.ternibori.org](http://www.ternibori.org)



The purpose of this publication is to contribute to policy-making and social programming that addresses the needs of Roma communities. Specifically, it offers insight and indicative evidence from the project's community work on the issue of early marriage. It is a delicate and complex subject, which intersects with burning tensions on the macro-societal level: between the mainstream society and the Roma, between the pull of the tradition and the push of modernity within Roma cultures, between the rights of the individual and the cohesion of the community. The international Roma women's network Phenjalipe with the World Travellers Forum, social researchers and prominent Roma women activists have all warned against oversimplification. It is an issue that has for many years played out on two opposing poles.

On one hand, there is the readiness of social workers and organisations that work with Roma communities to collude with the prevalent patriarchal structures and mores. Whether this comes from particular interests or from genuinely respectful feeling, the effect has been that of keeping the lid tightly closed on



the issue of early marriage. This widespread approach dismisses the issue of early marriage as "Roma tradition". This is most evident in the European and National Strategies for Roma Integration. Neither early marriage nor the vulnerable position of Roma girls and young women is singled out as a focus, or even specifically addressed. Yet, the formation of the family is the very point in the life-journey, where all the fragilities identified through the priorities of the Roma strategies – work; education; health; housing – coalesce. In our project work, we have taken as our starting point the harm caused to young lives, weighed down by risks, responsibilities and expectations, before they have had the opportunity to mature into a full independent person. We worked directly with people - difficult, frail, contradictory, resilient individuals, tightly bound up in their families and communities, very often isolated in a hostile environment. By sharing and reflecting on our experiences and the problems emerging through our

work with the communities, we have come to take a further bolder step. The bottom line of our practical and policy recommendations presented here is to change the approach and to put the person at the center of the policy making and social programming process. Roma Integration Strategy delivered via sectoral pillars is failing at the point of local implementation. Merely inserting the phrase "to prevent and to counter early marriage is a transversal priority of the strategy" will not generate social change. Moreover it would be a wrong objective. The real objective of the policy is to provide appropriate and accessible support measures to enable Roma girls and young women to develop their individual potentials as persons and as European citizens.

On the other hand, early marriage in Roma communities gets blown up in the media as a shocking scandal. This plays into extremist and racist views in the public at large that characterise criminal acts of child marriage as the norm of the Roma tradition. Moreover, it sets in stone the conviction that "Roma are all the same". Nothing could be further from the truth! The Roma cultures are a galaxy of differences. Not

only in terms of traditions, but also in terms of social progressiveness and in terms of willingness to embrace more pro-active attitude to embedding into mainstream societies. Such media-driven witch-hunts have fuelled anti-tziganism and street level racism, which ever since since the economic crisis has been very much on the increase.

This is like a curse on the heads of progressive Roma activists: they are



continually put in a position where they must choose between the battle for social progress and the rights of women and children of the community and their allegiance to their stigmatised community, under constant attack from the mainstream society. It takes a great deal of courage, knowledge and respect to work on the issue of early marriage with the intention of promoting progressive social change and supporting the rights of individuals in pursuing their personal development paths. This cannot be achieved by culturally neutral, short term measures nor can it be done by outsiders. In our opinion, preventing and countering early marriage is best achieved by structured long-term community engagement of Roma social workers, mediators and activists. This is the cornerstone of our practical and policy recommendations presented here as endorsed by the project's community work carried out exclusively by all-Roma teams.

The core of our methodology is simple: Roma working with Roma for Roma. This statement of methodology should be inserted in all Roma Integration Strategies as a core requirement of any action delivered through regional implementation plans. This process is undoubtedly challenging. There is a heavy overlay of intercultural expectations and requirements, and a huge gap in the capacity for collaboration on both sides. The work to do is demanding and costly. However, only this approach of subsidiary co-governance between the state and the community can bring about the desired results and transform estranged beneficiaries of social services into active and integrated European citizens. Roma community workers embedded as they are at grass root level in their communities will prove to be the best allies in achieving high-level public policy outcomes. This is a very different action from that of working through representative networks and rights activists or through established community leaders. Roma community workers offer a new model, "a new normality" for a progressive modernisation of a patriarchal culture. This will be the key for untying the delicate knot between identity and integration.



Here we set out our key principles, proposals and best practices. Our aspiration is that these will generate new thinking, provide examples and stimuli to the institutional and civil society actors. Partners wish to contribute further by bringing to the policy making processes the experiences, solution focused outcomes we have identified and the insight that community work has given us into early marriage issues in the Roma communities. In these pages, you will not find tables of data, quotations or policy formulations: we speak as we are. We do not suggest wording for policy documents; nor do we advocate new fields of intervention. Our aim is to draw to your attention perspectives and actions that can bridge the divide between refined declarations of intent and conditions of real life experience. We therefore ask politicians and policy makers to work with the approach we have outlined; to adopt the principles laid out below and include them in your work; to engage with Roma community workers in local communities; and to understand how much the environment and the culture both influence the attitudes of policy makers and limit the potential of the Roma Community to progress.

# Red Notebook Principles

to challenge early marriage through an intersectional approach:

**Invest in personal development paths  
of Roma girls and young women  
through community work**

Red Notebook



### Put the person at the center

Early marriage is a social issue. It occurs where poverty and segregation are so harsh that young women and their families see no accessible paths to better their lives. The routes towards a better life are the standard sectors of Roma Integration Strategies: school, work, health, housing, citizenship rights. The way to prevent and eradicate early marriage is to harness the existing sectoral policies and programs through a crosscutting priority: investment in personal development pathways for children and young people. This integrated approach calls for a change of perspective in public policy-making and in advocacy: we need to shift away from mitigating the emergency to developing an approach that puts an important number of young Europeans at the core of our vision of the future. The Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions “Assessing the Implementation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies and the Council Recommendation on Effective Roma Integration Measures in the Member States - 2016” COM (2016) 424, 27 June 2016 already contains the elements of this orientation. These must be taken forward through a renewed and concerted political will. The European Parliament should take political initiative to target specifically the empowerment for personal development of Roma girls and young women as a crucial factor for breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion, transmitted from one generation to the next.

## Early marriage is a PUBLIC POLICY TOPIC

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### Long-term perspective

Addressing early marriage among Roma means working towards a significant demographic change in an environment burdened by all aspects of precariousness. The person-centered integrated approach must be based on long-term structural public measures, in particular as regards schooling and housing. Small yearly project-based interventions must be replaced with measures fully integrated into general public policy planning. Roma Integration and Structural Funds can be used to give stable employment as public service social servants to appropriately trained Roma community workers, Roma health mediators and Roma school mediators, living and working within the communities. Priority in this should be given to professionalization of young Roma women, who can thus act, beyond their professional service, as informal educators and role models for the children and youth more widely. The thrust for social change and integration that comes from within Roma communities must be recognized, and supported by investing in the progressive forces within the Roma community. Roma community workers can provide living examples where the concepts of “public” and “Roma” can coexist harmoniously. They can represent a mechanism by which to transform fear, from both sides of the segregation barrier, to respect and subsequently trust.



The moment is now ripe to imagine afresh how Europe sees itself in respect to the values of social justice, solidarity and diversity, and equality of rights and opportunities of access. How the European Union treats its largest, oldest, poorest and most segregated minority is an important feature on the political horizon. It cannot be disregarded and delegated to just a few Roma specialists. It is necessary to start putting together now the building blocks for shaping the post-2020 strategic approach for European citizens of Roma culture.

## Local implementation and co-governance

The usual way to pose this problem would be to say that there is a gap between the EU and the national strategic formulations and policy indications and the real life of Roma people. The problem though runs deeper: they are two worlds set apart. One does not understand how the other functions. They do not have a common language. They share nothing except reciprocal fear, perhaps well founded on both sides. Occasional and specific mechanisms to connect the two worlds are too weak even to scratch the surface of this deeply rooted mistrust. Declared political objectives remain unintelligible words in an undecipherable language, detached from reality of Roma life. The immediate needs of the families and proposals for practical solutions cannot wait years to get through the multiple layers of representation of interests and policy programming. It is of vital importance to bring the interaction between the State and the Roma community to the lowest possible tier of interaction and governance, to the municipality level. It needs to play out at a level where people can start to understand each other, find common interests that benefit the general well-being of the whole area. This will enable people to cooperate in devising practical solutions. Such interaction builds relationships: it results in a growing social capital, which then translates into sustainability.

All programs and initiatives regarding Roma should be managed in a co-governance process between public institutions and the Roma community at the local level. Not in meetings of national representative bodies, for theirs is a different mission. What we are looking at here is the collaboration on a daily basis, where each party contributes according to its expertise. The accountability is mutual. Establishing and managing such working cooperation between public officials on local level and the Roma community is a demanding process. It calls for specific competences for dialogue from both sides and dedicated time. It therefore calls for an investment of both human and financial resources.

The agency that manages any public source funding dedicated to the Roma community must be fully-operational on a regional level and include as full-power governors the representatives of local Roma communities. It must control the entire cycle of programming, resources allocation, implementation and evaluation of long- and short- term interventions.

This work should be taken forward also by the European Committee of the Regions. CoR should assume a more prominent and pro-active role on the European level of governance as regards Roma integration. Investment in personal development paths of Roma girls and young women through community work to several of its political priorities.

## Mainstreaming into ordinary policymaking

We have singled out three dimensions of mainstreaming as being of particular importance.

First, the States and public authorities should fully respect the international conventions, most notably the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Istanbul Convention for the protection of women, and act upon these without distinction of race, culture and social standing. Roma children and Roma women have equal rights and must be treated as equals. Violations of individual rights must never be dismissed as “Gypsy affairs”. This should be inserted in the National Strategies for Roma Integration. Public officials should be held accountable for acts of discriminatory or dismissive behaviour.

Second, National Roma Integration Strategies, regional Roma Integration programs and Structural Funds should invest in personal development pathways for children, youth and young women as a cross-cutting priority. This should translate in supporting complementary measures of support for schooling, access to employment and participation opportunities, health and decent life conditions.

Third, ordinary local programming and sectoral policy-making should take the Roma integration measures and priorities into account. During the process of definition of any policy or public measure, the situation of Roma within their area or within their target group should be considered. Any likely positive or negative impact on the Roma integration should be assessed. Any public interventions or opportunities focused on children, youth or women should be actively promoted in Roma communities. Arrangements for Roma community workers to provide targeted information and supported access to opportunities, notably by help in preparing the necessary paperwork should be put in place in each respective community. Among the most relevant areas for such action are: early child-care facilities, NEET targeted initiatives, informal education and life-long-learning opportunities, women entrepreneurship and self-employment incentives, vaccination and health promotion programmes, scholarships and EU promoted programs, such as for example European Voluntary Service.

With the post-2020 strategy in mind, discussions should start to explore whether positive discrimination measures should be adopted as a means to break down the present marginalisation of Roma. An important element towards the mainstreaming objective is the development of reliable statistics on the Roma population in Europe. Even basic demographic data are missing. The other important task in this respect would be to highlight the existing social and economic statistics with Roma-specific indicators. Eurostat should be called to action on this as priority. In addition, the European Roma and Travellers' Forum recommendations to insert gender sensitive indicators in all Roma Integration Strategies should be heeded.

## Early marriage is a COMMUNITY ISSUE

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### Roma women as community workers

Community work is like gardening. It has periods of incessant work and others apparently dormant. It does not tolerate absences. It uses a great variety of techniques because every plant has specific needs. It is highly structured. It follows universal rules but it cannot be standardized. Every garden is a complex universe in itself. The best chance for every garden to thrive is to have a gardener that has grown up playing in it, lives in it, and knows every breath and pulse of every living creature in it. The community worker is part of the garden but has a higher knowledge base, establishes a vision and works to achieve it. We adopted this method in our project. All team members working in the field are Roma and it worked out exceptionally well where they were part of the community with which they were engaging. This is because someone who is a part of the community knows what mechanisms to trigger and what traps to avoid. This approach draws on sharing the same language, culture, and sense of belonging. Community work is at the heart of durable change – but under one condition: that it is durable itself. Community work is not campaigns alone and cannot be project based or spasmodic in its interventions. Where communities are in conspicuous need, marginalized from wider society, or experiencing internal or external conflict, the community worker must represent reassurance, reliability and continuity.

For our objectives, the impact of engaging primarily Roma women as community workers has multiple benefits. The effect of empowering others by example is strong. The professional standing of being engaged as a Community worker and taking on intermediary roles with the mainstream society lead to enhanced status in the eyes of the community. In this way, Roma women create new role models for others, demonstrating a possible alternative that impacts particularly on children, girls, and mothers. They can also be a bridge into different ways of thinking, particularly where communities are marginalised. They are also excellent vehicles for the promotion of self- and social entrepreneurship, a privileged pathway towards economic independence.

a particularly strong impact is that of health, and most notably in reproductive health. The role of ‘health mediator’ has been deployed very successfully in the Balkan countries. This figure provides information around sexual health and childbirth, childhood illnesses, prevention, access to public services. It is a welcome point for further dialogue on issues of intimate concern and acts as an intermediary in making contact with health professionals. Finally, this is instrumental to developing the sense of self-respect and social skills, in particular for the adolescents.

## Community spaces: an unrecognized need

Consideration of civic life in Roma communities has not so far surfaced in public policy and debate. This in itself narrows the opportunities we might create for community-driven integration. All it takes is to provide a dedicated space – a hall, a room, a small building, where people can meet and activities are organized. It should be easily accessible to all and managed as a common good, of benefit to the whole community. Such a space would give a sense of ownership and provide a ‘cushion zone’ between crowded and hierarchical family domains and the outside world where Roma are so often seen as unwelcome intruders. Drawing on the experience of this project, we have identified three key functions that could run from such a facility. These are: To provide an information desk and a space where private conversations may be conducted; To act as an education facility that reaches out to the whole community; To offer space for a youth club.

The need for information is paramount but it is only a starting point. The addition of a dedicated consulting room will provide a space where groups and individual can access a range of services and advice. Public servants, health professionals, legal professionals, mediators and community workers would all use this space to interact with the community members. It would be particularly important for women, as it would provide the only safe space, outside the family, where women could take their troubles and discuss issues specific to them. This sort of facility would widen access to public service provision, giving the community a ready source of information and help with paperwork. It would greatly ease the process of engaging with public services and other public institutions.

A range of logistical barriers significantly hinders Roma participation in educational opportunities and in vocational or professional training. Apart from the more familiar barriers of costs, capability and willingness to engage, the venues where these activities take place are often difficult to travel to. For women and girls in particular, such places simply remain “off limits” and beyond the realm of possibility. The community space, however, could host training events, workshops, individual and group support, literacy courses and much more. Most importantly, it should provide orientation in vocational or professional training and so support women to achieve the required qualifications.


The youth club is a space for peer learning, self-expression and socialization. For adolescents, it is a place of freedom and stimuli, where civic competences and soft-skills can be exercised and developed. Most importantly, youth club methodology builds confidence in relationships and provides occasions for both girls and boys alike to act unbound by traditionally imposed heavily gendered roles.

## School, school, school: education is the key



Levels of educational attainment among Roma are so woefully low, even among the younger generations, that these statistics alone could mark the failure of the EU as “society of knowledge”. It would indeed be revealing to see the impact of Roma on the Europe 2020 indicator for early






**Supporting the education of Roma girls and young women is the **paramount priority**, the main means through which to invest in personal development pathways .**

school leavers. Yet education is supposed to be the priority of Roma National Integration Strategies. Moreover, through our community work research, we have discovered that generally, Roma tend to assign a very high value to education - even for girls! The relationship of cause and effect between low school attainment and

and early marriage is a complex one. There is no doubt that in general keeping girls in school longer has a strongly positive impact on their life chances and is the most influential factor in preventing and combatting early marriage.

Education is the core personal resource from which girls and young women can build their psychological and economic independence and carve their own path as full members of the family, the community and the wider society. The period of pre-adolescence is the most critical time for setting the foundations. For successful integration, girls need to be 'hooked in' to learning at an early stage, through supportive opportunities for schooling before they start to be seen as "big girls" and therefore "little women". Most importantly, they must have access to different models and choices before they fall into simply complying with heavily gender-defined roles in a strongly patriarchal society. At the same time, however, it is important to respect the core values of being a mother and the driving force in your own family. Thus, school must be seen not as an alternative to this model of life, but a way to do it better. By becoming more capable in determining your own life and improving your own life choices, you can establish the basics for a better future of your children.

The proposals advanced here are all part of the infrastructure and associated conditions needed to achieve the desired and challenging outcome. Isolated actions and non-formal engagement with pro-Roma organizations is clearly not capable of making a real difference.



**Creating a pact between the State and the Roma Community to focus on the education of Roma girls and young women should be a **fundamental part** of the post-2020 strategy.**

Only with a public policy that tips the scales in favour of a critical mass of young Roma women can we hope to generate change from within the community. Formal educational attainment is doubly powerful in the hands of these young women. It gives them the literacy skills, professional training and social capabilities needed to engage independently with mainstream society, the public services and the labour market. It also confers on them a recognized status and authority within the Roma community. They stand as positive role models for the children and youth of the community and competent spokespersons to reckon with for the older generation. In time, this will build a new, more modern balance between the genders and strengthen Roma women in representing their own interests and those of their children.

A woman with some formal schooling at least has the chance to enter the labor market – this is a fundamental consideration. If you have completed high school or a certified course of vocational study, to get a job when you are 18 years old is an achievable ambition. It is a perspective that might persuade many young people and their parents that finishing school rather than marrying young would be a better option. Such mechanism of job-guarantee for Roma girls should be explored further and evaluated.

Scholarships for Roma girls and young women is a simpler mechanism to develop - and one that should be implemented over a longer term and on a widespread scale. This should not be just for study at university level or for exceptionally gifted pupils. Studying to obtain a diploma is especially challenging for those who live in poverty. It involves numerous additional expenses: daily travel, food, decent clothing, school materials, participating in additional educational opportunities. For the Roma family, it is not just an expense that is often impossible to meet: it represents a double loss, since it means giving up the prospect of more immediate earnings too. Scholarships must be considered not as a merely individual opportunity, but as a mechanism embedded in a



system of social benefits and incentives centred on the family.

During childhood, co-operation between teachers, school authorities and families is of critical importance. The action of Roma school mediator can open the door to other successes too. For children in deprived, isolated or rural communities, it is most important to work on support for schooling that takes on a wider perspective. It is vital to address all the circumstances of the child and its family. For example, it might be necessary to offer additional social care by providing food, transport or social and cultural opportunities in ethnically mixed environment. Support to educational attainment should be introduced as standard social policy measures and funded securely from Roma Integration and Structural Funds.

## **Early marriage is a COMMON CAUSE**

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### **Combat racism and stereotypes**

Racist attitudes stifle the progressive forces emerging in the Roma community. When the public sphere becomes tense, differences within the Roma community are silenced and any internal movement towards modernisation and integration loses traction. When feeling under attack, the whole community feels victimized. The reaction is to defend its identity, close the ranks, esacerbate traditionalisms. Some of partners experienced this and were singled out for exposing the issue of early marriage in public. When exposed to racism, Romanipen, the pride of belonging to the Romani culture, always comes first. An improvement in the general environment, clear condemnation of antiziganism and a ban of hate speech in the media would render more fruitful the work of Roma women activists and community workers in promoting progressive integration.

A second barrier is the widespread assumption that Roma means a single homogeneous culture: that all Roma share the same traditions and that all communities have developed and are governed according to the same principles. This is emphatically not the case and needs addressing. Also as regards early marriage, the traditions of different ethnic groups are varied. They come about from an intricate web of causes and effects, determined by a combination of complex power structures within the community and the strength and nature of the relationship between the group and the mainstream society. There is very little knowledge about the variations within the Roma culture or about the factors influencing modernisation processes. Serious qualitative and quantitative research is required to provide a sound base for future programming.

### **Responsibility of the civil society**

The agents of civil society should stop relegating the issue of Roma integration to pro-Roma organisations alone or to specialised public agencies. We have to do more than talk about non-exclusion to bring Roma into the public domain, especially given the increased hostility and intolerance. Third sector organisations and their networks should take a public stance on the treatment and needs of Roma peoples as a matter of social justice. They should engage proactively with Roma activists and grass-roots organisations through shared initiatives and networking. Creating a culture of solidarity and sustaining active citizenship is a primary responsibility for all civil society organisations—and this must include Roma women and Roma young people too. Finally, civil society has a responsibility to look to the future and specifically to address the needs of children and young people. The responsibility lies in opening up opportunities that will help young Roma to become full and active citizens through engagement with their peers. It is vital that all children and young people of both sexes have the opportunity to experience life beyond the limited circumstances of their own community and meet people from different backgrounds and cultures.

# dominant mainstream culture:

exclusive, racist, segregationist, violent

school

civil  
society

peers

local  
institutions

work

intersectional approach  
genders and generations  
long-term perspective

community work  
role models  
Roma women activists



family

Roma community

traditional Roma culture:

patriarchal, heavily gendered, isolationist, protective

# Red Notebook Principles

to challenge early marriage  
through an intersectional  
approach:

**Invest in personal  
development paths  
of Roma girls and  
young women  
through  
community work**



The focus of the policy interventions we propose to prevent and challenge early and combined marriage are Roma girls – Roma children, youth and young women. The objective is to raise their capacity to self-determine their life choices, which is heavily burdened by multiple discrimination to which they are exposed on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, young age and social standing. Poor living conditions – poverty, spatial segregation, low

cultural capital of the family, cultural capital of the family, limited access to educational opportunities – harshly challenge at the start their opportunities for personal development. Both the patriarchal culture of origin and the racist dominant culture play as oppressive negative forces that stifle intra-communal progress and render residual the individual possibilities of choice.

The practice of early marriage can only be challenged through an intersectional approach that addresses in a unitary long term public policy vision the complex interlock of oppressive environmental factors. The involvement of the school system, of the local public institutions and of the civil society is crucial to sustain the societal change that can help Roma girls to raise themselves from the conditions of extreme frailty. The expected outcome of these actions is to generate breaches in the social isolation of the Roma community, which exasperates traditional prerogatives and attitudes. This integrated intersectional approach considers the Roma girl as heavily embedded within the family and the immediate community: the involvement of both genders and of all generations, especially parents, ought be considered. The operational strategy we propose is based on community work of Roma social workers, mediators and activists and on the protagonism of Roma women as the most precious drivers of intracommunal change.



# Roma women activists



The Roma ghetto camps in the city of Rome have never had women representatives in the interaction with public institutions. Since 2015, with the emergence in the public sphere of RoWNI – Roma Women Network of Italy, a group of middle-generation women from different camps, mainly of ex-Yugoslavia origin that came to Italy during the Balkan wars, have started to participate to public meetings. This is the sparkle we have used to start the project work. Every mediator worked in her own camp or in other communities that she had connections with.

This is the stronghold of our method: group meetings and individual dialogues on matters so intimate as marriage, family relationships, health and life prospects have been induced and led by “one of us”. Especially on these topics, when the operator is a woman, our empathic approach can plant the seeds of self-reflexion deeper and water them longer. It is a soft way to raise awareness that can reach many people.

Most importantly, the Roma woman that has been activated as operator in the community work remains as a permanent example and a reference point in the community. The major problem with this is that short-term activation on experimental projects is largely insufficient. A permanent, stable mechanism of Roma women as community workers should be invested in on local level. This is not without difficulties, as the gap between the usual formal mechanisms of monitoring and evaluating





Our association unites women proud of their ethnicity and culture, but determined to promote their integration in the Italian society. We organise activities that can help the process of women emancipation and of social inclusion in modern life. We want our communities to abandon the practices that limit the individual dignity. Most of our members are women who live in “camps”, have no work and a very low level of education. The protagonists of our engagement are women and girls from different Roma communities.

The community work was done in several “camps” in the capital city of Rome and in the “temporary dwelling spaces” in Torino, with different Roma communities of ex-Yugoslavia origin and with the Romanian Roma. The “camps” are characterised by less than basic housing conditions and total segregation, where permanent unemployment of entire families is the norm.



training-on-job for Roma women activists engaged. Some have experimented themselves for the first time and some have bettered their skills in managing structured interviews and group meetings. All have developed a good understanding on how to reflect and report on individual experiences and integrate these into a collective process that harnesses the voices of the community into constructive proposals for action. Project work provided multiple occasions to take word in public – inside a team, within the community and in larger public meetings. To stand in front of the public and deliver a prepared speech is a boost for empowerment.

The community work on the issue of early marriage was openly criticised as exposing a negative image of Roma to the public and ostracised by some male leaders. Our women stood their ground and have shown themselves capable of contributing a new perspective: mothers of the community putting at the centre better life prospects of the new generations. The thing that the operators engaged in the project ask for without exception is: work and prospects of integration for the young.

This was recognised as valuable: several adolescent girls helped the team members to prepare and report on the community work activities. This is the result we are most proud of.

the results of social action and the competences of Roma women is quite big. Enormous, when it comes to written interaction. To engage Roma women as community work operators is a fundamental choice of principle and the basis of a durable change, but it is necessary to acknowledge that an extra investment in training, logistics support and mentoring should accompany this effort. The capacity to read a document, send an e-mail or write a note should not be given for granted.

The preparation, evaluation and reporting of community work was an important process of



# Role Models And Media



We have dedicated our best efforts to pre-adolescent and adolescent girls, aged 9 to 15, in very poor and very traditional rural communities.

It is a very delicate and tumultuous period of life, with all potential still open to build your own life. It is the period when we make a projection of what we will be as adults and start acting in conformity to this image of ourselves. This image of ourselves is not free and creative, it is predetermined by direct experiences of our early life. To the girls growing up in poor segregated villages the image of the world comes only in black and white. On one side, their mothers and their families, that have never experienced anything different but being mothers and parts of family governed by traditional patriarchal ways. On the other side, the glittering TV world that is not only distant, but overtly hostile and denigrating. It is most important that girls of this age have the opportunity to get direct experience of Roma women who lead different lives. It is vital they know that being a Roma woman in today's world is an infinite rainbow of possibilities.



Through our community work, in an informal way, through dialogue and direct contact, we have presented to adolescent girls a series of role models. A Roma woman can be anything: a professional, a political activist, a

gynecologist, a psychologist, an actress, a PhD in sociology. An economically independent, personally realised, modern and yet fully Romnja, knowing and respectful.

Direct contact with such women provides multiple mirrors for adolescent girls to understand that there exists the possibility of





## FFRR – Forumul Femeilor Rome din Romania

Forum of Roma Women from Romania represents the interests of Roma women - Romanian citizens of Roma origin. Our aim is preservation, expression and development of the Roma minority, in accordance with the principles of equality and non-discrimination in relation to other citizens, enshrined in the Constitution. We work to ensure equal, free and universal access to quality education at all levels in the public education system to all Romanian citizens of Roma origin, especially to women. We work on prevention and elimination of segregation. Our main field of interest are education, culture and media.

Workshops in schools, information sessions on reproductive health, community meetings and social theatre performances were implemented in four traditional isolated rural villages with gated communities: Bughea de Sus and Cetateni (Arges), Sotriile and Mizil (Prahova).



choice. It is an incentive to dream, to set your own objectives, to take courage. I was the first woman to drive a car in my village. I got a scholarship to go to the medical school. I work in the Parliament. I can be who I want to be.

In this effort to open the eyes of the girls to the myriad of possibilities in the ways of the world and to activate them to reflect on their life prospects, the media play a powerful role. Direct engagement of protagonists of a famous TV show and broadcasting of reportages from our community meetings had a wide impact. Real people on TV, instead of negative stereotyped images – makes a world of difference.

To walk to becoming what you want to be, two legs are necessary. One is school. The necessary path to becoming what you want to be, to becoming anything you want to be – is education. Our community work and the method of role models revolves around the importance of schooling for personal development. The other essential element is the awareness of one's own individuality, of the right and the necessity to determine your life by yourself. In the traditional Romani culture, where family roles are felt strongly, this is not to be given for granted. Starting from decisions about your body – information about reproductive health is an important element of building the capacities of girls for personal development.



What emerged as a surprise in discussing early marriage in the community work with adults, was the experience of various men, who recounted how marrying very early put a block on their lives as adults. This has led us to understand how important it is to work with both sexes and to recur to life experiences also of men.

## Youth clubs



In the course of the years of our work with the community, we have observed that young Roma people are contrary to the proclaims of national strategies and European programs, in local reality, a greatly neglected target group. We ourselves have developed in the past successful programs for, on the one hand, elementary school children and, on the other hand, for young mothers and mothers-to-be. Specific initiatives targeting specific needs of a clearly defined target group. Knowledgeable, respectful and most useful activities – but still basically a delivery of services to people in need.



Instead, through our work with the students' club at the university, we have put in practice a different approach. Our association basically helps a group of young people not only to realise initiatives, but essentially to build their identity as competent active European citizens, capable and willing to re-invest stimuli into their communities of origin. This type of work we see as planting trees. It is rewarding: we are looking at

the first generation of integrated young Roma professionals that can start tearing down the stereotyped image of what it means to be a Roma. But – university students of Roma culture are a very small niche. An elite who, with more or less difficulties, gets progressively integrated into the student community and public sphere. At the same





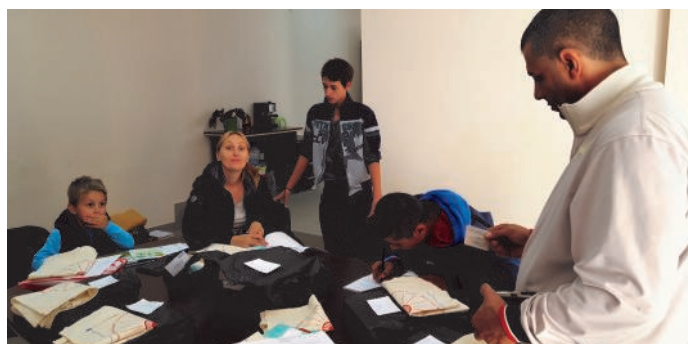
Persons Ideas and Actions for Effective Solutions. Our name is who we are and what we do: Roma activists and social workers who work with and within the community for sustainable change. The focus of our work are Roma children and youth in the Bulgarian region of Blagoevgrad. We support children with scholarships and cultural opportunities. We have supported the creation of Roma Student Clubs, groups of university students of Roma origin who collaborate with us in actions aimed to promote the values of education and to combat racism and stereotypes. We work also specifically with women, on general and reproductive health issues.

Youth clubs were established in four municipalities of the Blagoevgrad region: Blagoevgrad, Belica, Simitli and Krupnik. All the territories chosen are characterised by big and compact Roma population, but their characteristics vary from big city, to small town, to village, to an isolated village.

time, their everyday life and habits separate them from the ordinary life rhythm of the community. So, while the university students can pose an example for the younger ones, they are not necessarily a mirror for their peers.

The “normal” life proceeds differently. So, what opportunities for personal development are open to “normal” young people in Roma communities? Out of school, with no prospects of work, shunned from any possibilities of socialisation with their gagé piers. Trapped in a vacuum between patriarchal traditional poor families and modern life whose doors of access they perceive as being slapped right in their face ever since they were little. And that keeps belittling their culture into raggy folklore.

We have set up the youth clubs on a very simple basic idea: to provide a space where young people can meet, exchange ideas and information, learn, listen and be listened to. An open space, easy to access. A safe space,



free of judgement. A stimulating space, that can help you reach out to opportunities for your personal development by reducing the initial barriers. A space rich in new and varied relationships beyond the family connections that often keep the youth in an opaque bubble. The youth club as we have experimented it is like a window in this bubble of segregation. The youth are led to discuss issues, to voice their opinions, to agree on activities to organise, to reflect and thus mature their capacity to take decisions on their own life. Or just left alone to hang out and have fun as a group. With nothing much – except the joy and the curiosity of being

with their peers. Like “normal” kids do. Youth that have a city park or a living room large enough to meet their friends in peace and privacy. Which is very important.

In conclusion: while the youth club contains important elements of non-formal education, its most vital aspect is that of social infrastructure. It is a communal space where youth can experiment themselves in transversal relationships, exercise self-expression and gain experience of co-managing common good. Which is all about building soft skills and citizenship competences. It is a bridge from “Roma community” to a community of citizens of Roma culture.

# Together with public authorities



Our starting points are very simple and they orient our work in every field – educational, social and cultural. First, Roma are citizens with rights and duties equal to citizens of any other ethnic origin. Second, the duty of public institutions is to take care of all its citizens regardless of their background. Furthermore, the public institutions are called to act in pursuance of the basic democratic value of equality, that in Croatia as in many other countries is enshrined in the Constitutional principle: “Every citizen... shall have the right, under equal conditions, to participate in the conduct of public affairs, and to have access to public services.” In this, the clue aspect is that of access to public services under equal conditions. A great majority of people living in rural Roma settlements in our region, do not have the same possibilities to access public services, let alone public life, as the majority of population. Because of their extremely poor living conditions, Roma families need additional care and support in the provision of public services, in particular in the fields of schooling and health. In addition, because they are of Roma culture, they are exposed to explicit discrimination and to passive racist or dismissive attitudes.

As Roma social and civic organization, our action towards public





Our mission is to build the Roma community by contributing to better the living conditions and the quality of life and by promoting the education of Roma children and youth. Our specific focus is the activation and the capacity building of Roma women. All our activities are implemented by including Roma and mainstream population alike. We believe that to break the stereotypes and prejudice it is necessary to work shoulder by shoulder, regardless of ethnicity, nationality or religion. On these premises, we support the capacity of Roma community to represent their interests in the dialogue with public institutions and to responsibly contribute to positive social change.

Community work was implemented in the rural communities of the continental Osijek-Baranja region of Croatia - Jagodnjak, Beli Manastir, Darda and Belišće, with big population of Roma long-settlers of Romanian origin.

institutions is of double nature. On the one hand, we keep them accountable not only for their actions, but also for what they fail to do or are not diligent enough, both as regards the safeguard of rights and in the provision of public services. On the other hand, we do not simply wait for the State to perform its duty – we contribute. We propose, organise activities, deliver services, concentrate volunteer work on priorities, raise awareness and profuse informal educational opportunities. We talk to people. We nurture relationships. All our activities and initiatives are based on direct engagement of public officials and of Roma people, who contribute different competences and different perspectives. By working shoulder to shoulder for the same practical, concrete objectives, they learn to understand each other, to decipher the codes of conduct of the other system, to share the pride of a common result. The starting points of our collaborations with the public authorities were the schools. When a girl from one of our villages continues to high school – it is felt as a victory of all: teachers, parents, our team. The same type of collaboration we have developed with the local health institutions and the municipalities.

Now we are considered as a serious interlocutor for what concerns Roma Integration Strategy by our Region and our work is being promoted as good practice to other regions. It is very important that both civil society organisations and public institutions experiment the benefits and recognize the values of horizontal subsidiary collaboration. What we can reach together, none of us would be capable to reach on its own. Doing things together enhances social capital and fosters social change. Our next challenge is to foster the inclusion of Roma representatives in agencies managing and determining public funding destined to Roma communities.

In this project, we have developed an extraordinarily fruitful collaboration with local police institution. We have collaborated to produce and disseminate together a documentary film as an instrument of soft persuasion against the risks entailed in early marriage. But even more important than the film and its message, are the side effects of this collaboration. They are symbolic of a cultural change in making: on how the police regard the Roma, and on how Roma regard the police. Not enemies to fear, but partners for social progress.



## Same rights for all



In the face of discrimination, it is not enough that policies be equalitarian in enunciation. In order to guarantee the same possibilities of access to rights for all, they must be sensitive to conditions of vulnerability. Being a Roma and being a woman cumulates double exposure. This cross-cutting aspect of multiple discrimination remains invisible in policy making. The Istanbul Convention for Action against violence against women and domestic violence rightly devotes specific attention to migrant women, women asylum-seekers and women refugees. The specific situation of vulnerability of Roma women, characterised by strong patriarchal traditions of the community, conditions of poverty and significant transnational dimension, is not brought into light or even mentioned. At the same time, Roma Integration Strategies are not gender sensitive and have not evolved yet to acquire the indications of the Istanbul Convention. This makes it difficult for NGOs and community workers to propose initiatives in the field of prevention. The other two fields of action against violence, namely protection and prosecution, are rendered difficult by the deeply rooted reciprocal mistrust between the Roma and the state officials. Even in less problematic and not intimate spheres such as the employment agency for example, only a small number of Roma declare their ethnicity. Even if this bears positive effects or incentives, because they get to be discriminated openly or offered less paid jobs. Also schools, social welfare offices and health care agencies are not comfortable in dealing with Roma issues. This generates an even tighter closure of the Roma community. Such general situation makes it very difficult for Roma women to denounce violence, also because they fear that any contact with state authorities puts them at risk of seeing their children taken away from mother's custody.

PARTNER AUSTRIA  
**Papusza**

Papusza is a young organization, tackling the issues of human and minority rights and of children's rights through providing adequate conditions for education. It works on the policy dimension and promotes best practices of Roma grass-roots organisations from the Western Balkans. Papusza worked in Vienna, where the majority of Roma families originate from ex-Yugoslavia countries.



# Cultures in interactions



We are a group of people from parts of Italy so different they sometimes appear as different countries. The things that anonymous suburbs of large Northern cities share with small towns of the South are the two languages we have been using in parallel for 600 years - Sinti Romani and Italian - and the solid separation line between the Sinti Italians and the Italian Italians. Our activities aim to nurture our culture and to make ourselves known and recognised by the mainstream population for our rich and peculiar traditions. Our experience shows that the best way to overcome mistrust is through simply doing things together. At different levels: from social initiatives in collaboration with public authorities to workshops with mixed groups. We collaborate a lot with other associations, especially for rights based actions. On the policy level, our battle is to have Roma and Sinti recognised as a national minority in Italy, which would be very important for the preservation of the language and for the standing in the public sphere. The other cause we cherish is the memory of Porrajmos, the Romani Holocaust. We work very much with schools. To understand history is an important key for developing a critical attitude, respect for differences and a sense of solidarity. Direct interaction in mixed groups is crucial for building personal experiences that can help, especially the youth, decipher the world they

live in and develop their capacities to make sound individual choices. Through cultural initiatives, we invest in citizenship competences of Roma and non Roma youth alike. The most powerful language we use is music. Listening to music together, learning about it, discovering the elements of and inspiration from our music in the work of famous and much loved musicians and, especially, making music together – generates a powerful bond. Not only because it can connect across cultures, but because it can connect across social classes and circles, which is an opportunity that Roma youth dearly miss.

### PARTNER ITALY SINTI **Romano Drom**

We are a social cooperative that runs a museum of Roma culture in Milano and a small catering and street food business where Roma youth work. We organise educational and cultural initiatives. In the project we have worked with Sinti communities in the regions of Lombardia, Molise and Abruzzo.

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**Centro di Servizio per il Volontariato del Lazio**

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# Invest in personal development paths of Roma girls and young women through community work



Early marriage is a **SOCIAL DIMENSION**

**Put the person at the center**

Early marriage is a **PUBLIC POLICY TOPIC**

**Long-term perspective**

**Local implementation and co-governance**

**Mainstreaming into ordinary policymaking**

Early marriage is a **COMMUNITY ISSUE**

**Roma women as community workers**

**Community spaces: an unrecognized need**

**School, school, school: education is the key**

Early marriage is a **COMMON CAUSE**

**Combat racism and stereotypes**

**The responsibility of the civil society**

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