

# Tales of Roma women's resistance

Roma womens organizing in Southeast Europe

---

Introduction	2
Researcher's Note	3
Methodology	3
Limitations	4
Who are the Roma?	5
Roma Women's Movement	7
Systemic exclusion through poverty   North Macedonia	8
Layers of Discrimination - Difference in geographical contexts   Serbia	10
Mocking the "conference" women   Serbia	12
The Need for intentional capacity-strengthening opportunities   Croatia	14
Creating a new Roma "template"   Bosnia and Herzegovina	16
Organizations in the settlements are sometimes the only way to understand the "outside" world   Bosnia and Herzegovina	19
Early marriages as an outcome of poverty and gender discrimination   Montenegro	20
Roma girls are at a crossroads   Albania	22
A unified approach to Roma issues does not exist   Bulgaria	24
Setting a Roma feminist agenda   Romania	25
Network = Movement   Greece	28
The situation is improving, just not fast enough   Kosovo	29
Feminist Empowerment through Sisterhood - Arhanghella's experiences as a Roma trans woman   Romania	31
Collaboration instead of Tokenism - Interview with Bianca Varga ∞, a non-binary Roma person   Romania	33
Conclusion	35
Recommendations on how to support young Roma feminists	36
How FRIDA has supported Roma feminist organizing and steps forward	39

---

---

## Introduction

To genuinely embody feminist solidarity as a practice we need to challenge the systems of oppression that inhibit our exploration of different pathways to liberation. Practices which also deter us from the course of our mission to co-create transformative change so our communities can thrive must be faced if we hope to persevere. Reimagining intersectional feminist futures requires reflection, open dialogue and an understanding of how our social, cultural and political contexts weave together and shape our society.

This research honors Roma feminist organizers' stories of resistance, struggle and survival of the interconnected systems of oppression that confront Roma people in the societies, institutions and in many cases the very social justice movements they are a part of. Roma wisdom and alternatives to how we build community with one another is braided into each generation. While this culture has been historically appropriated and extracted from, it is not respected and credited when practiced by Roma people. Roma communities are diverse and resourceful; with a rich culture of community building and quite often unrecognized contributions across science, technology, the arts and culture. However, Roma face an ongoing discrimination and exploitation from the societies and institutions that systematically deny access to safety, resources, education and justice.

This collection of stories has emerged from a collective process to draw visibility towards Roma feminist organizers, especially young women, girls, trans and non binary people in Southeast Europe.<sup>1</sup> Roma feminist movements are continuously creating ways to support their communities and often take the role of the institutions that should be creating these conditions of protection and support. There is a history of systemic and economic blockading of Roma communities that prohibits their organizing, mobility, sharing of experiences and their participation in decision-making processes on every level.

These exclusionary practices also affect Roma organizers' access to funding, protection and support for their work and to connect with social justice movements globally. We need to make our work and approaches more accessible by keeping Roma organizers' realities and needs at the center. We are sharing these stories with the broader feminist movements and philanthropic institutions to think collectively about how to build practices that allow young Roma feminist organizers to thrive, sustain their work and acquire decision-making power about their future.

To secure a space where people who live similar realities can be in a conversation with one another, build trust and solidarity, takes its own time and should be approached with care. We understand that we couldn't cover all the experiences and voices and we hope that FRIDA takes this as a beginning of continuous commitment to support Roma feminist organizations by creating systems and practices that are close to this community and that enable conditions for their voices to be heard.

We hold deep gratitude for everyone who trusted us to share their stories and reflections. Also, we hope that those who get to read the stories can as well appreciate these experiences and reflect on their own practices. This is an invitation to philanthropic institutions as well as feminist movements to incorporate this knowledge in their work and join the fight for the justice and freedom of Roma communities.

*Jovana and Suzi*

---

<sup>1</sup> We started this process in 2018 with the Open Society Roma Initiatives Office that supported an internship program for Roma young feminists at FRIDA The Young Feminist Fund. It has since grown into a research project with young Roma feminist activists.

---

## Researcher's Note

While researching the issues of Roma<sup>2</sup> women and LGBTQI+ community I found that being a Roma woman myself plays an important role when discussing the field experiences of Roma feminists and activists. While most of the interviewees asked for my ethnicity out of curiosity, some asked for it out of caution, to gauge how careful they should be in answering my questions since it is not uncommon for authors to create false generalizations and present the challenges that Roma face in their everyday lives as “ethnic behaviors”. That is one of the reasons why poverty, low educational level, unemployment, violent and criminal behavior are some of the ethnicized negative traits prescribed as elements of the Roma culture. Knowing that I would try to avoid misinterpretation and misrepresentation of their experiences in the field, the interviewees were more trusting and, as a result, the discussions were more intimate and fruitful.

## Methodology

As a young feminist funder, FRIDA is committed to ensuring that young feminist movements have the resources necessary to further their activism. Through our participatory grantmaking model FRIDA is engaging with the young feminist community via participatory decision making and feedback processes, research and accompaniment processes to improve our systems and strategies of support.

Guided by this information FRIDA reviews and modifies its grantmaking systems, strategies and outreach processes before every new cycle to address the gaps and challenges that may limit different communities to access and apply for FRIDA grants. Throughout the years, even with adjustments to FRIDA's systems, criteria and outreach there haven't been many applications and inquiries from Roma-led organizations in Southeast Europe, in spite of the tremendous need for support. Even though many of the reasons “why” this was occurring were clear, it was important to speak to Roma feminist activists across the region and to learn “what kind of” support is most needed and “how” it could be best implemented to support the strengthening and sustainability of this movement.

The research process was set to facilitate a conversation with the activists and communities, so it focused on interviews rather than surveys, questionnaires and other digital tools. Even though one might assume that a survey would reach more people, this was not the case with a Roma community which often doesn't have access to the internet, safe spaces or might experience language barriers among other difficulties. The intention was to create a safe, informal environment where people are interviewed by a researcher that comes from the community and has a deep contextual understanding of what is being shared.

This report was built on the conversations from semi-structured interviews with 19 activists from the Southeast Europe region between 2018 and 2022. The goal was to interview at least one activist per country, regardless of their involvement in a formal organization. 12 of the interviews were conducted

---

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Roma’ is used as an [umbrella-term](#) to encompass diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveler populations, and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as Gypsies.

---

face to face, 6 online, and 1 interviewee chose to send her answers in writing. The interview questions were open-ended and provided the interviewees the opportunity to share their stories, drawing from lived experiences and experiences from their activist work. On average the online interviews lasted 45-60 minutes, whereas most of the face to face interviews lasted 2-3 hours. The interviews were conducted in English with the participants from Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo and Romania; and in local languages with those from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece and Romania (with the help of translators), Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

It was clear from the beginning that the methodology might need to change during the process, so we left room for flexibility that would allow for a more in-depth insight into grassroots organizing and specific issues that Roma girls, young women and trans youth are facing. The vision for this report is to serve as an invitation to engage, listen and learn from Roma feminist activists about their lived realities and the ways how you can support their organizing.

## Limitations

### Geographical focus

This research focuses on the experiences and challenges of Roma activists working in the field of Roma girls', women's and LGBTQI+ rights in Southeastern Europe<sup>3</sup>. There are certain similarities and shared experiences within Roma communities across geographies, however, not all lived realities of Roma people have been captured in this report.

### Locating young Roma women-led collectives

Since this research focuses on issues of Roma girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth and their self-organizing/involvement in activism, the biggest challenge that emerged during the mapping period was locating young feminist collectives led by and focusing solely on Roma girls, young women and/or LGBTQI+ youth. As the preliminary research showed, such collectives in the Southeastern European region are not common and they are organized mostly within already established organizations led by older generations or men.

### Collectives rarely focus solely on Roma girls and women's issues

According to the interviewees, when working with a marginalized community it is impossible to organize activities only for young women, girls and LGBTQI+ youth, and disregard women of other generations, boys, men in need. Also, if change in the lives of Roma girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth is to be achieved, women of other generations and men have to be educated and involved as well. Therefore, of the 19 activists and collectives we were able to locate and interact with for the purposes of this research, 9 were young Roma activists below the age of 35 who do not focus solely on Roma girls, young women and/or LGBTQI+ youth. The rest of the interviewees have leading roles in Roma feminist collectives and vast field experience in Roma feminist activism.

### Talking about the most pressing issues

---

<sup>3</sup> Southeastern European region is used to refer to the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia.

---

Another factor that limited the scope of this research was that during the discussions, interviewees were mostly focusing on issues that Roma girls and young women in Roma neighborhoods/communities<sup>4</sup> are facing. The severe practices aimed at controlling girls' lives and bodies (forced marriages, school dropout, limiting their movement and possibilities for socialization) are affecting many more girls and young women living in Roma neighborhoods and because of their gravity deserve immediate attention and action. Due to the open-ended nature of the interviews, the interviewees focused on issues that they see as a priority, thus leaving less space to discuss the equally important issues that Roma girls and young women outside of Roma neighborhoods face. According to our interviewees, Roma girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth living outside of these areas are not exempt from discriminatory mistreatment and their experiences should not be overlooked.

### **Reaching out to rural areas and people with disabilities**

We understand that the number of people interviewed can't represent the entire community; they don't represent all experiences, backgrounds and identities. For this research, we have reached out to activists from both urban and rural settings and we have collected more information about the differences in access and lived experiences. However, we recognize that a more intersectional approach is still needed. The stories that we have collected are just a starting point in sharing the realities of Roma women, girls and LGBTQI+ youth in Southeast Europe.

Moreover, we have not interviewed Roma women, girls or LGBTQI+ youth disability activists. We recognize that this very important perspective from people who experience multiple discrimination is missing. The issues around access, bodily autonomy and sexual freedoms, daily discrimination, exclusion from education, and labour are even more heightened for Roma women, girls and LGBTQI+ youth with disabilities.

With this research, we are embracing the commitment to learning, listening and reflecting on how we can provide more meaningful and sustainable support to Roma feminist activists. Even though many stories have not yet been captured in this research, we are committed to creating systems and strategies in our work that would prioritize these voices and make them visible.

## **Who are the Roma?**

Roma do not have a country of their own, but are a people that can be found throughout the world. It is estimated that 10-12 million Roma live in Europe today, making them the [continent's largest ethnic minority](#). They speak dialects of the Romani language (although not all Roma speak the language) and have a flag and anthem. Roma do not share a predominant religion.

Their ancestors migrated from India, more than a millennium ago and reached Europe around the [13th or 14th century](#). The exact reasons and patterns of migration are not known since Roma did not record their history but research has clarified their general origins. Previously, information on Roma were largely derived from accounts of travelers who in some instances falsely assumed that [Roma had migrated from](#)

---

<sup>4</sup> The terms 'Roma neighborhood', 'Roma community' and 'Roma settlement' are used by interviewees to describe an area within a city, town or village where the majority of the residents are Roma.

---

[Egypt, thus the exonym “Gypsy”](#) which is a slur word still used today pejoratively to refer to Roma people.<sup>5</sup>

The initial curiosity and fascination with the Roma by European people and rulers quickly turned into hatred, racism and discrimination, that is still prevalent today. The lack of knowledge about the culture and traditions of Roma people paved the way for authors and artists to create stereotypes and an overly romanticized image of Roma’s way of life, obscuring the gruesome realities that Roma have had to endure throughout the centuries. Below are just a few of the [“anti-Gypsy” laws](#) which were practiced in Europe in the previous centuries.

- [From the 14th until the 19th century Roma people were enslaved in former Wallachia \(today’s Romania\) and Moldavia;](#)
- [In 1501 Roma were banished from the Holy Roman Empire. Roma people were considered outlaws and citizens had the liberty to capture and kill them;](#)
- [“Gypsy” and “Heathen” hunts were organized in Saxony and the Netherlands;](#)
- [In the 1600s Roma men were imprisoned, women sterilized and children sent to poorhouses in France;](#)
- [In Spain on the 30th of July 1749, “Black Wednesday”, 9,000 to 12,000 Roma people were rounded up to serve as forced laborers;](#)
- [In 1773 Maria Theresia, Empress of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, decreed the prohibition of marriage among Roma and the placement of Roma children among non-Roma families. Her successor Josef II forbade Roma people from wearing traditional Roma clothing and speaking the Romani language.](#)

The intolerance towards the Roma escalated during the Second World War with the Roma Holocaust or the ‘[Samudaripen](#)’. Labeled as racially inferior, it is estimated that 250,000 to 1.5 million Roma people perished under Nazi rule. [They were either sent to concentration camps to be experimented on, used for labor, or Roma were executed in mass killings.](#) Compounding this tragedy is that fact that, the survivors of the concentration camps were not eligible to receive compensation packages since the Roma Holocaust was not acknowledged. To this day, Roma activists are fighting for the recognition of the Roma Holocaust, which has not been widely acknowledged and recognized, and is often forgotten.

**Important dates celebrated internationally by Roma people:**

- **8th of April** - International Roma day. Celebrated to commemorate the First World Roma Congress held in 1971 near London, England. The Roma flag and anthem were adopted, and usage of the term ‘Roma’ instead of Gypsy was accepted;
- **16th of May** - Roma Resistance Day. Commemorating the events of the same date in 1944 when Roma and Sinti prisoners in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp managed to hold

---

<sup>5</sup> The word "Gypsy" is a derogatory reference to Roma people. Even though some Roma people might self-identify this way, non-Roma people should be using the umbrella term Roma.

---

off the SS guards whose plan was to murder around 6,000 Roma and Sinti prisoners in the gas chambers;

- **2nd of August** - International Day to commemorate the Roma and Sinti Victims of the Second World War;
- **5th of November** - International Day of the Romani Language (proclaimed at the International Romani Union Conference held in Zagreb, Croatia, from 3rd to 5th of November 2009);

## Roma Women's Movement

Some might wonder: “Why is there a need for a separate Roma women’s movement? As women, Roma women face the same difficulties as all women. As Roma, they face the same issues as Roma men”. The fact is that Roma women’s realities are very different from both non-Roma women’s and Roma men’s. This research explores those diverse realities, the realities of Roma women, girls and LGBTQI+ people – in varied contexts even as a sub-group – , as well as the realities of activists who advocate for change on the frontlines. Moreover, this research examines the intersectional nature of the challenges that Roma girls, women and LGBTQI+ youth face in their specific contexts, through the prism of activists who have been tailoring their approaches to address and advocate for these issues. Simultaneously, activists have to find or carve their own space on two fronts. First, building alliances with mainstream feminists and fighting for their issues to be recognized in the mainstream feminist circles and second, fighting for recognition of discriminatory practices by Roma men.

*“When it comes to Roma it’s not really clear at what age they are considered girls and when they are considered women. In some communities a girl who is 15 [years old] is already considered a woman and she gets responsibilities like an adult person.” - Mihaela Dragan*

When I started this research, I knew that my experiences as a young Roma woman puts me at an advantage when it comes to understanding the context that I am exploring. While I approached the research with an open-mind, I still assumed that being a Roma woman myself, I was aware of the different kinds of realities that exist for Roma women in the region. Naturally I was proven very wrong, very fast. First and foremost, as Mihaela shared with me in the quote above, the distinction between what should be considered Roma girls and young Roma women is blurry. While the first instinct would be to make the distinction based on age, this is not applicable for so many Roma girls who, at a very young age, must assume adult-like traits and carry the burden of caring for a family as well as raising their own children. Moreover, the perception of Roma girls is very different from that of non-Roma girls in the eyes of the public. In many contexts officials are not shocked when a Roma girl is married before the age of 18; nor do teachers react as strongly when Roma girls cease to attend school, the cause of which is the acceptance of adultification of Roma girls as a cultural element.

Which brings me to my second point; it is impossible to capture the realities of Roma girls and young women in the region by positioning them under umbrellas such as “Urban experiences” or “Rural experiences”. While there might be similarities between contexts, every lived experience brings out a new reality which contributes to the multifold of Roma women’s experiences.

The key findings and recommendations in this research derive from a qualitative analysis of the 19 open-ended interviews conducted with feminists and activists operating within the Southeastern European region, with vast experience in the field of Roma girls’, women’s and trans issues. Three key findings are:

---

## I. Discrimination and societal challenges

**Roma girls and young women's issues should not be homogenized.** Being the largest European ethnic minority makes the Roma population an extremely diverse one. Whether and to what extent girls and young women will be subjected to unequal treatment within their community largely depends on the place of residence – if it is of urban or rural context, or within a Roma neighborhood being the primary factors. – Economic status and familial views on gender roles play an important part as well. Roma girls and young women face specific challenges in different social settings. As an example, according to our interviewees, it is much more common for parents from Roma neighborhoods to insist on marrying off their daughters at a young age, and in some communities the practice of “buying” a bride is still being followed. Parents in rural areas often use literacy as a measure of educational success and once this has been achieved, their daughters are ready to face the world; this is entirely unlike their urban counterparts who, besides being of a higher socioeconomic standing, would never consider interrupting the education of their daughters.

## II. Roma girls' and young women's involvement in activism

**Roma girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth at the moment prefer to self-organize through well-established organizations.** Organizations which have operated within or in close proximity to Roma neighborhoods, have developed relationships with the people in the community and have gained strong reputations. As a result, girls are not restricted by their families and can actively participate in activities organized by them. Moreover, many of the young interviewees believe that their needs and opinions will be heard and taken into consideration and do not feel the need to establish new collectives. Such organizations provide a safe space for their young members, and young Roma members know that they have the liberty to organize activities based on their interests and needs.

## III. Challenges that Roma feminist collectives face

**Lack of network inclusivity limits the opportunities of newly founded collectives for visibility, funding, and partnerships.** Financial support is a key component for ensuring the growth and sustainability of a collective. However, being part of a network was identified by our interviewees as being equally important, since a network would provide visibility, partnerships, support systems and different kinds of support to newly founded collectives. While an international Roma women's network was an idea that came up very often during our interviews, for many it would suffice to be part of national or international feminist networks.

The interviews that were conducted for the purposes of this research are divided into 14 chapters that draw on one of the themes tackled during the interview. However, as mentioned in the limitations, they do not encompass all of the issues and lived realities of Roma girls and young women in the region.

## Systemic exclusion through poverty | North Macedonia

Not surprisingly, I started the research from my own context - my home country. After spending some time researching organizations online and asking people for references on organizations led by young



---

Roma women, I contacted Sarita Jasharova, one of the prominent Macedonian Roma activists who has worked on promoting the rights of Roma on a national and international level since the early 2000s. In 2005 she founded the [NGO 'Lil' for the protection of the rights of women and children](#) and, along with her team, is offering legal support to Roma women in need.

As a graduate lawyer, Sarita acknowledges the need for the recognition of the civil status of Macedonian Roma citizens, since, as she states: “...*only as legal citizens can they exercise their basic human rights, such as social and health rights.*”. The goal of the Association is to raise the standard of living, access to health care and the general wellbeing of the Roma population. The Association aims to protect the rights of Roma women and children by informing them of their rights and liberties, providing support in legal cases, assisting them in acquiring personal documents etc. The Association mainly focuses on the most marginalized people of the Roma population.

I met Sarita in a cafe on the Vardar quayside, just as I finished explaining the purpose of the interview and turned on my recorder, a young Roma woman in need passed by our table and recognized Sarita. In the short conversation that they had, Sarita asked her about some of the legal processes that they had obviously started together and they agreed to meet next week in the ‘Lil’ office.

Witnessing this short exchange made me realize that Sarita is not your “ordinary lawyer”. Sarita doesn’t just wave to her clients during her lunch break, but like so many activists, she genuinely cares about the community and tries to support people in any way she can. However, as she says, there is only so much that collectives can do for the communities, considering the lack of finances and flexibility from funding partners and governmental institutional support.

*“Donors often disregard the need for open funds for social services. Working with people in the field, many approach us with their individual problems...”*

Project funding supports Roma-led collectives to spread crucial knowledge to women, by organizing lectures, workshops, and learning-visits. However, as Sarita points out when working in the field, activists work with real people dealing with real issues. Providing education to people, without offering them the means to see the whole process through, is not nearly enough.

*“You organize a workshop and you teach women the importance of having personal documents or you encourage them to leave their spouses if they suffer from domestic violence. But issuing personal documents, fixing their civil status, divorces, paternity tests and all of the other court proceedings cost a lot of money. There are also people who are illiterate and the social workers are not willing to assist them in writing complaints or requests. So, if we cannot offer them financial help, the information that we are providing them is useless, they cannot use it...”*

When asked about the lack of young Roma-led women's organizations, Sarita shared that in the last decade, there has been a surge in the number of Roma girls and women who finish secondary and university education, however there are not many employment opportunities for them. Mostly, they are offered unpaid volunteer or internship positions which people without other financial income cannot accept. Therefore they cannot attain the necessary skills and networks to self-organize, self-actualize and eventually develop organizations which would serve their specific needs.

*“...paid internships and fellowships have to be offered to young people. Their effort and time has to be valued, and unpaid volunteer positions do not motivate young people. If organizations offer them 6 months or 1 year paid internships with a possibility of employment, we will have experienced and motivated young people who will want to give back to the [Roma] community and will be able to self-organize further on. That is learning by doing.”*

---

The lack of employment opportunities for Roma women leads to economic dependence on male members of their families. Unemployment is high in North Macedonia, however compared to non-Roma people, [the number of unemployed Roma people, especially Roma women is strikingly higher](#). Roma women remain trapped in a cycle of poverty which leads to their [inability to access services and improve their living conditions](#). Drawing from her field experience, Sarita believes that economic independence of Roma women is key to bettering their living conditions and solving many of the issues that young Roma women face.

*“...issues of majority women differ from the issues of minority women, mostly because of the unemployment rate and lack of employment opportunities for the latter. Take as an example the issue of domestic violence. Even in the past, women and their parents were not tolerating domestic violence and divorces were not uncommon, but it is a question of how society accepts them. Once economically depending on their husbands, upon divorcing they now depend on their parents.”*

The biggest takeaway from the interview with Sarita is that 'LiL', like many Roma led organizations in the region, works towards making information accessible to marginalized Roma women who would otherwise not have access to this knowledge. However sharing information and having knowledge is only the first step of many towards achievements.

## **Layers of Discrimination - Difference in geographical contexts | Serbia**

From Skopje, the research continued to Belgrade where I had arranged to meet Marija Mitrovic, the founding member of 'Association of Young Roma in Serbia', and Danica Jovanovic, a Roma feminist and founder of the [Association of Roma Novi Becej](#). The Association of Roma Novi Becej is devoted to creating support systems for Roma and other minority women to raise their voices regarding the different kinds of violence that they endure as a result of early marriages. Aside from organizing informative and psychosocial sessions and offering free legal aid, the Association has introduced an SOS telephone line for victims of violence and they provide their services in Serbian, as well as the national minority languages Hungarian, Romanian and Romani. According to the 2016 records of the Association, an average of 97% of the Roma girls calling the hotline have survived sexual violence. Dealing with such sensitive issues, Danica indicates that they have faced fierce resistance from many Roma men, but have the full support of the Roma women's organizations operating in Serbia with which they have established a regional and national collaboration.

I conducted both interviews on the same day, making it much easier for me to understand the differences in contexts that Marija and Danica were referring to. On one hand, Marija focused more on the discrimination of Roma girls and women by non-Roma majorities in education and employment, whereas Danica focused on the impact that patriarchal roles have on Roma girls living in Roma neighbourhoods.

I conducted the first interview with Marija, who has been working with young Roma people from the whole country, as well as non-Roma human rights activists. According to her, patriarchal values play an important role in the whole Balkan region, and the smaller the context the more emphasized these roles are. Moreover, she acknowledges that while women do not enjoy the same liberties as men, Roma

---

women face multiple forms of discrimination due to their sex and ethnicity within and outside of their communities; these aspects significantly contribute to lack of trust in the feminist movement.

*“Patriarchal traditional roles are still heavily present in the Balkan region. In smaller cities and villages, tradition is stronger in Roma and non-Roma families. But Roma women have the burden of dealing with discrimination and unequal treatment because of their ethnicity... the feminist movement, and the human rights movement have prejudices and stereotypes towards Roma women, and Roma women have prejudices and stereotypes towards other women or groups. I believe that is one of the biggest problems when it comes to bettering the situation of women here...”*

Dealing mostly with Roma youth, as one of the biggest challenges for young Roma people Marija recognizes the discrimination of Roma students in education, especially by their peers and school staff. Compared to their non-Roma peers, [the number of Roma children enrolled in the education system and completing secondary education is very low](#). Moreover, [peer violence due to ethnic intolerance towards Roma children](#) is present in schools in Serbia.

*“Now these are modern times, so there are groups on social media, Viber groups where the topic is some young Roma person who is being ridiculed. In Serbia there are no mechanisms to deal with this kind of bullying but there is also no interest by the school staff to stop such practices”.*

Unfortunately discrimination towards Roma women doesn't end in the education system. [Discrimination by employers](#) is prevalent in the country, however as Marija shares, Roma also deal with discrimination from their colleagues in the work space:

*“...when they send their CVs or have a telephone conversation everything is ok, but when they go for an interview, very often they are told that the position is filled. I know a young Roma student from Belgrade who got a job in a brand name clothes shop, but she faced discrimination by her colleagues who were telling her that she is Roma so she should be part of the cleaning staff and not be a sales person like them”.*

The discussion with Marija, confirmed the knowledge that I had from my own experience as a woman in the education system and in the job market. I was expecting that the interview with Danica would go in a similar way and my knowledge would once again be confirmed. However, this was not the case.

I headed to a hotel where Danica had agreed to meet me. Upon arriving at the hotel cafe, Danica greeted me as an old friend, although we had never met before. After listening to the recording of the interview, I realized that there were so many loud voices in the cafe, but all of my attention had been focused on the brave stories that Danica was sharing with me, about their activism in a rural, traditional environment. During the interview, Danica highlighted the issues of Roma in the province of Vojvodina, located in north Serbia where the association is operating.

*“We work in a rural environment. We organize different marches all the time, for all kinds of themes, like racism, LGBT...so some 10 years ago they attacked our office, calling us a litter of lesbians. It's a very small environment. You cannot hide anything. We had to work behind closed doors, with bars on the windows and video supervision”*

Despite the backlash that they have faced from the communities and the threat to their lives, Danica shared that they have never even thought of giving up their activism. Knowing firsthand the issues that Roma girls and women face in their communities, Danica is aware that their activism is crucial for changing the lives of Roma girls and women in the settlements.

---

*“...they don't go out of the neighborhood, they just take care of the children, they do not have personal documents, they are not employed so they do not have their own income. The stereotypes towards Roma are very strong. When she (a Roma girl) goes out of the neighbourhood she is bullied, sexually molested. They don't go to school. I will share one devastating fact. There is only one Roma girl enrolled in secondary education in Novi Becej. Only one. And she is one of our activists...”*

This short account into the everyday lives of Roma girls underlines the problem of access to education in general. While Marija was discussing discrimination of Roma girls in the education system, Danica shares that Roma girls in the settlements are not even enrolled in schools. Moreover, Danica raises the issue of early marriages being common for Roma girls not only in settlements in Serbia, but also [across the region](#).

*Moreover, selling Roma girls into marriage is still considered part of the tradition. How can we speak about opportunities when you sell her into marriage in the sixth grade? People are poor and they think that they are doing some favor to the girls by marrying them in a foreign country. Even poverty is a type of violence toward Roma. Roma are constantly being pushed toward poverty since they are not given equal opportunities. With all of this we cannot say that we are equal to other people”.*

The key finding from the interviews conducted with Marija and Danica is that reports on the situation of Roma girls and women often do not emphasize the difference in the contexts that they are exploring. While reports present a very good general image of what is happening on a national, or regional level, they don't differentiate between issues faced by Roma girls and women living in urban and rural contexts.

Activists work tirelessly to draw attention to these issues and improve the situation of Roma girls and young women in their respective contexts. Due to their resilience young Roma girls can use creative means, such as creating the first Roma girls band [Pretty Loud in Serbia](#), and pave the way for young Roma women and girls to speak up and oppose patriarchal attitudes within their communities and systemic injustices that keep them in a marginalized position.

## Mocking the "conference" women | Serbia

After coming across and being inspired by a UNICEF article [A voice of reason, a voice for the future](#) highlighting the work of a young Roma feminist activist from Serbia, I reached out to Silvija Nešić to schedule a virtual interview. Her educational and activist successes make Silvija a role model for many Roma girls living in Roma settlements. Through her experience, Silvija shows that there are many paths for Roma girls that do not confine them to the house as caregivers or as mothers. While she faced, and continues to face, many challenges as a young Roma activist, she has no plans to stop and is an inspiration for girls across the region.

*“As a Roma woman activist, gender equality continues to be a struggle for me because male Roma leaders definitely do not understand the importance of the Roma women's movement and activism and see us as a joke; for them, the issues that we tackle are invented issues. When we speak about early marriages they see that we just invented it. Or when we speak about domestic violence, they say ‘well women also harass men’. These things are said by young people and highly educated people, but also activists who are older. Which made us conclude that this has nothing to do with the level of education, it is about men's way of thinking. They always think that we lie and we don't have these problems. The problems don't exist and we made them up. Especially us Roma women*

---

*activists, they call us “conference women” because we attend conferences, discuss some key issues ... And this comes from Roma activists. This is also a type of discrimination. Moreover, because of these men some women cannot be actively engaged in activities; but we still try to engage and motivate them”*

Silvija touches upon a very important issue that has so far not been mentioned by other interviewees. As a young Roma woman activist she faces different kinds of backlash by younger and older Roma men - denial that the issues of Roma women and girls exist, and ridicule for their activist work. In turn, this type of ridicule presents an obstacle for women to engage in activist work since not all girls and women have the freedom to participate in activities without approval from the men in their families. Furthermore, Silvija shares that some people are distrustful of the work done by the grassroots collectives, and might feel suspicious of the programs that organizations are implementing due to the opinion that collectives earn money from their participation and the aim of the activities is not to support them with their challenges.

*“The work that NGOs are doing in tackling the challenges that Roma are facing is very important. But there are also NGOs which work for their financial gain and that makes people distrust organizations. They think ‘you all work for money, you get money from me participating in your activities.’”*

The type of activities and programs that activists organize differ from community to community. As was discussed with other interviewees, Silvija points out that Roma girls and women do not face the same challenges across all of Serbia. Depending on the context of where they live, some young women struggle with finding employment opportunities, whereas in other contexts Roma girls are not permitted to continue their education out of fear that girls might get married without the knowledge and approval of their families.

*“The situation of Roma is different in every city. I could say that in my city [Pilot] the situation is better than in some southern cities in Serbia. Education has always been important for us. Maybe because during socialism when equality had reached its peak, Roma men and women were employed in factories and that might be a reason why there is a lower level of discrimination than in other cities. Roma people from rural areas face the biggest challenges. They live in hardship, sometimes they do not even want to declare themselves as Roma and they face a lot of resistance from the institutions or wherever they seek assistance. The majority of Roma are not given equality in education, in institutions or in employment; priority is always given to the majority population. And even though they say that it doesn’t exist, it exists. Even I didn’t believe that it existed until I saw it for myself. Also, many times the traditional views of the family makes them redirect their children’s paths. We need to convince older generations that education and employment are extremely important and not that women should be housewives and work only in the household. I have seen examples of girls who want to continue their education, but the parents do not allow them to. They are afraid that maybe they will get married to someone that they meet in school.”*

When asked whether young Roma women and girls self-organize, Silvija shared that there are not many collectives run by young Roma women in the country. Usually women who are older, who have wider networks and more experience are the ones leading the organizations. However, as in Silvija’s case, many young women do not feel the need to self-organize because they are supported by the existing organizations. They feel that they can self-organize through existing spaces while at the same time have the support of experienced activists.

*“Older Roma women who have more experience, in cooperation with young Roma women, organize activities, projects and events because these older women have the leading roles in the organizations. There are not so many young Roma women in leading positions in organizations. Now, whether young Roma women do not form organizations because they do not see their importance or because they have faith in the older Roma women leaders I cannot say for certain. In my case, I am sure about my organization, my coordinator, so I personally do not*

---

*see a need to establish an NGO because, through this organization, I can organize what I want. This might be the case also for other young Roma women throughout Serbia.”*

In regard to engaging and keeping young Roma women and girls motivated to participate in activism, Silvija shares that the best motivation is keeping the conversation going and standing in solidarity with other Roma girls and women. Oftentimes they might feel scared to speak up against the systemic oppression they face because they might feel isolated and alone in this struggle. In her experience as a peer mentor and activist, Silvija draws her motivation from the strength of her peers.

*“I believe that the best motivation is showing examples of good practices, or role models. Introduce women to other women who have had and have surpassed similar problems as them. The experiences that we share are very important. Even myself several times I have found myself in a workshop that I am leading in which I am asking questions and some woman answers and I think ‘ok, I’m not the only one with this problem’. The two of us speak, and maybe a third woman thinks to herself ‘they are facing the same problem as me. I’m not alone’. When I am with these women I am relieved and say to myself that I am not alone. When Roma girls see a Roma woman who has her own goals and lives her life then they say to themselves ‘If she can do it, I can also do it.’”*

Silvija’s interview confirms the gendered discrimination that exists within the field of human rights. Girls and women’s activism is often perceived as either “cute”, or unimportant. This is only one of the many challenges that Roma girls and young women face when self-organizing and why joining more established non-profit organizations could seem a safer choice. The non-profit organizations that apply intersectional feminist lens could provide valuable space for young Roma women and girls to amplify their voices and advocate for their visions.

## **The Need for intentional capacity-strengthening opportunities | Croatia**

While in Belgrade, I reached out to Nadica Balog, a Roma activist, founder and leader of the [Association of Roma women ‘Romsko Srce’](#) based in Jagodnjak, Croatia. During 2001-2003, Nadica, along with 11 Roma activists and in cooperation with the Croatian government, drafted the National policies concerning the Roma population still being implemented today. The goal of the Association is to contribute towards raising the quality of life of the Roma population in Croatia and closing the gap between the Roma and non-Roma population. By lobbying, the Association addresses the housing, health, employment and educational challenges that the Roma population is facing; issues such as low employment opportunities for Roma and raising the number of Roma pupils involved in education. As a result of their efforts Roma families have received 58 social houses/apartments; building materials have also been provided in some instances and more infrastructure has been built in several Roma communities. The projects and activities organized by the Association are devoted to developing the potential and capacities of economically disadvantaged Roma and non-Roma people alike.

Via email I told Nadica that I was conducting a research on young Roma women’s activism, and when I arrived in Jagodnjak she was expecting me together with Dragana Đurđević, one of the young Roma members of the organization who is managing some of the project activities. Dragana has been a member of the Association for several years during which she has been actively involved in the realization of numerous projects. Moreover, Dragana has assumed a leadership position in a project called “Marry when you’re ready” aimed at increasing the number of Roma girls who complete the

---

conventional education process and raising awareness about the risks of early marriages and the importance of education. She has contributed to the Association's publications and has gained extensive grassroots experience through its attempts to raise the quality of life for Roma through promoting Roma girls' and women's rights.

I was pleasantly surprised when Nadica told me that since the research focuses on young women it would be best to conduct the interview with one of the young feminists from the organization, and she would be there to support Dragana, if needed.

*"I have a lot of faith in our young members. They are very capable young women. I have been an activist for such a long time that I don't believe that I will ever retire; however I would love to see this organization being led by the young members and me to be somewhere in the background, just giving some advice. If it was up to me I would have already transferred the leadership to the girls, but for some reason they still do not want it..."*

I must say that there were two things that surprised me in this situation. First, I had mistakenly thought that older activists were not willing to share the spotlight, let alone be willing to step down in order for younger activists to take on the responsibilities of managing an organization. Second, I hadn't considered the possibility that if young women, even those with immense experience such as Dragana, were offered leadership positions they wouldn't accept it. The reason for this, as I realized from further conversation, is that formal education and workshop/seminar attendance has proven to be insufficient in preparing young Roma women and girls in assuming leadership positions. Even when young women are given the opportunity to become leaders, many might turn it down, fearing that they might be undervalued because of their age or feel that they are missing certain capacity strengthening skills and support.

*Dragana: When it comes to education they [Roma] finish elementary school, and when they have to continue to secondary education they see people who have finished high school, like me or some other Roma woman or man, and are not employed. So they lose their motivation. Even for us, we work when there is a project, but when the project finishes we do not have anywhere to work. And the institutions do not want to recognize our work....it is much easier for a non-Roma woman to find a solution than a Roma woman. Starting from the institutions, when they see your skin color they immediately have a different attitude*

Moreover, long time activists such as Nadica are more comfortable confronting officials about their discriminatory attitudes toward the Roma community.

*Nadica: We go from house to house to share information about services. Sometimes even Dragana's father drives us and we go to people to explain to them what services they can use for themselves and their children. We go to institutions and sometimes we even have conflicts. We had a quarrel in school. If it was for a non-Roma child who wasn't attending classes you would immediately get worried and start asking the parents where the child is, but when it's a Roma child you don't care and you just say she probably got married, that's the Roma tradition. We want to see an increase in educated young Roma people and not an increase in married and pregnant young Roma girls."*

Project funding has been helpful for the Association to raise awareness and share information within the Roma communities about services available for them. During the duration of a project, the Association tries to include as many young people as possible to work for their communities. However the biggest fault of the institutions as Nadica shares is that they don't take over once the project is finished so no real improvement can be made.

*Our association is well known here, so when we have funding to organize a project and we go to introduce our project to the institutions, the first thing they say is 'we don't have money to give you'. But then when you explain that you have the money, you need different kinds of support they are more than willing to help. The*

---

*problem is that through our projects we try to engage as many people, especially youth as we can, but when the project finishes the institutions do not take over. That is why we do not see any kind of improvement.*

Furthermore, in the rural context where the collective is operating, many Roma women carry the responsibility of providing for their families and taking care of their households. This makes it nearly impossible to engage young Roma women in programs which require a lot of their time, on a volunteer basis, without offering them any kind of financial remuneration or possibility for employment.

*Nadica: "Involving Roma women in activities can sometimes be challenging. That is one of the biggest problems. Because they struggle for survival... Dragana: Yes, she (a Roma woman) will not come if she is not being paid, being employed or receiving a per diem. She will not get involved because she knows that at home she can finish many responsibilities that for her are more useful than being here. A lot can be done through volunteer work, but only people who already have money can be volunteers..."*

The interview with Nadica and Dragana made me reconsider my own perceptions of the support that young Roma women and girls need to self-organize. Before our discussion, I was convinced that financial support was sufficient for a collective to operate, and capacity strengthening seemed secondary, something that was acquired through experience. Moreover, I thought that people would be more than happy to jump at the opportunity to advance to a leadership role without second thoughts. However, I discovered that capacity strengthening opportunities should accompany financial support and there can be no real advancement if one is provided without the other. Roma activists have extensive field experience and can be proud of many feminist victories, yet the most common type of support that they receive is project based. Without long term interventions that provide both funding and capacity strengthening, there can be no sustainable growth for Roma grassroots collectives.

## **Creating a new Roma “template” | Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The research continued to Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. I met the program manager of [“CARE International, Balkans”](#), Jadranka Miličević, in person and conducted an online interview with Indira Bajramović, a founding member and president of the first Roma women’s collective in Bosnia and Herzegovina [Roma Women's Association “Bolja Buducnost”](#) based in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Having worked on women’s and Roma women’s issues for many years now, Jadranka and Indira had a lot to share about the situation of Roma women in Bosnia and Herzegovina specifically and in the region, as well as creative solutions, such as mentorship opportunities, to support young Roma women to organize themselves regarding issues that concern them.

Both Jadranka and Indira agree that there is a great need for Roma women-led collectives that will work on raising awareness and tackling Roma women’s issues. Roma women and girls do not face the same challenges as non-Roma women, and in addition they are also subjected to discrimination from non-Roma women. Moreover, practice has shown that Roma men-led collectives do not prioritize the specific issues that Roma women face in their respective communities; they face unequal treatment from Roma men as well.

*Jadranka: "There are not great differences between Roma women’s issues and broader women’s issues. However, there is the issue of discrimination of Roma women. There is the case in this country\* where the director of the safe house for women is a woman and was not admitting Roma women facing violence except when it was in her interest to do so. That is discrimination based on race and the prejudices that they have toward someone’s skin color. It exists. And it is evidenced. It happens with women’s organizations as well. They have prejudices and*



---

*discrimination towards Roma women as well as people with disabilities and LGBT people. If I speak for women's rights, I do not exclude certain women from these rights. That is my politics."*

Indira: *"The organizations led by men that existed didn't have the attention for Roma women's issues. When someone says human rights, they ask why do you distinguish between Roma men and women, but I think that there is a difference. It depends who works on it, who is on the other side. When a woman is speaking it's different when she is speaking to a woman or a man; especially in our region where patriarchy is still dominant which makes some topics taboo, and women, especially Roma women, cannot speak about some topics with men as they can with women... The issues that Roma are facing are not only their problems, but they are societal issues. If we speak about low attendance in schools of Roma we cannot speak only to Roma, we have to speak with institutions also. We always try to work with institutions, other organizations... We try to dismantle the prejudices and stereotypes that non Roma people have towards the Roma population. We celebrate the Roma holidays like 8th of April, the international Roma day, we celebrate the international day of Roma language etc; we want to show people our rich history and culture. No one can tell me that our tradition is Roma girls being married at the age of 12, 13 or that begging is our tradition. Everything that I consider "trafficking" they say is our "tradition."*

So how can Roma girls and women be supported to self-organize? Jadranka and Indira agree that in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are many Roma women activists who are already doing amazing work in their communities; however, due to the lack of skills and capacity strengthening opportunities they are not visible in international spaces. Furthermore, language is often an immense barrier for many Roma women activists from the Balkan region, who cannot interact in international spaces without translation provided. Given the size of the region, Indira proposes that organizers make an effort to provide translation in the events that they are organizing.

Jadranka: *"It is important to support Roma women with capacity strengthening opportunities. We don't really have a lot of Roma girls and women who speak fluent English and have a university degree. When we started our projects there were amazing activists who had only finished elementary education. So I contacted our donors to provide us with this kind of a technical grant. To support our activists to pursue higher education. They have the knowledge but if they don't have the diploma it's all for nothing..."*

Indira: *"There has to be bigger cooperation among Roma women's organizations in the Balkans. When we look at the international conferences organized in Brussels (or) Strasbourg, which countries go there? Bosnia is not there, nor Serbia, or Montenegro. Usually there are representatives of other countries. There is also another big problem. If you invite people from the region and you know that we all understand each other in Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian, which are understood in Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and even in Macedonia; so if you have representatives from there and you want them to come, try to find a translator because not everyone understands English or Romani. We want to give our full contribution. I have so much experience and I want to share so much I cannot say because my knowledge of English is not good enough to express myself in the way that I want to. There are many important conferences held without us, women from the Balkans. And we can definitely say a lot, because we work a lot and we have a lot of experiences and positive practices to share."*

Having worked with Roma girls and women from different geographical contexts, it was easy for Indira to compare the situation between girls who grow up in urban and rural environments, and girls who grow up in Roma neighborhoods. As she shared, rampant poverty within Roma settlements and lack of basic living conditions are creating a so-called template for young people that is hard to escape. To put it very simply, the template entails enrolling girls in primary education to acquire basic literary skills, while at the same time acquiring knowledge on household responsibilities in their homes. This is followed by marriage and motherhood at a very young age. Although this "template" is followed within many of the Roma settlements, it's a template that is imposed by outside factors, such as discrimination of Roma women, and low employment opportunities even for people with education degrees. As Jadranka noted,

---

while the number of employed, educated Roma women remains low, young Roma as well as their parents will not have any successful role models to look up to, which makes the familiar template the only available option for the Roma youth.

*Indira: It is clear that Roma parents living in the cities do not differentiate between their sons and daughters in the sense that they want their children to be successful at school; they want their children to find adequate employment. While living in isolated communities is much more complex. It's like there is a template that everyone is following. Which of course has to be changed.*

*Jadranka: "How many role models do young people have? They finish school, they don't have a job. You are talking to them about their rights, but you don't give them employment. Young people have to be stimulated. Society and the system is the biggest obstacle for not having young Roma women engaged in their issues. If they don't have a job, what can they do? Ask their parents for money or marry. So what would be your motivation to be engaged in activism?"*

Roma women activists are working tirelessly to break down the old template and create a new one that Roma girls and young women will be able to follow. Encouraging the youth to be involved in activism is difficult, especially without the necessary support. Having passed the "thorny activist road" themselves, Indira recognizes how important financial stability and capacity strengthening are, however it is essential for newly founded collectives to have a supporting network as well to contribute towards their visibility and share positive (and negative) experiences and practices. *Bolja Buducnost* came up with an innovative mentorship path to contribute towards the resilience of young Roma women-led collectives.

*Indira: "For 10 years we were the only Roma women's organization in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through our work we were mapping girls and women whom we helped organize and to whom we were like mentors in their work. For some we were seeking donors, we were giving small grants, doing monitoring, showing them how we work and so now we also have other Roma women's organizations in the country. We have organized ourselves in a Roma women's network called '[Uspjeh](#)' and since we are the leading organization we are seeking funds for meetings, joining activities, we are lobbying together; we also raise funds for capacity building for the girls and women, but also enhance their personal networks and the networks of their organizations. Moreover, for our projects we partner with these organizations, include them in as many activities as possible, and share information in order to contribute to their sustainability."*

*Jadranka: "There is a need for a Roma women's network in the Balkans. When an organization has a problem, someone else has already dealt with that problem. We need to share experiences among ourselves. Instead of trying to figure out new solutions we can also use positive examples from someone else... Speaking on a regional level, one of the biggest issues for non governmental organizations is visibility. Grassroots organizations which are tackling and successfully dealing with local issues have the most difficulties in finding funds. When donors want to donate to organizations, it happens very often that grassroots organizations do not reach the recommendation list since people with relations who have just registered an organization come with the highest recommendations. Also, many donors disregard the need for visibility; making a website and promotional materials cost a lot of money."*

Having worked in the field for decades, Jadranka and Indira have a wide knowledge and expertise regarding Roma girls and women's issues. The biggest takeaway from the interviews that I conducted with them is that activists can pinpoint the exact reasons for keeping the so-called "Roma template" in place and have the ideas and solutions to break down the old template and create a new one. They know that as long as society is against young Roma women succeeding in their desired fields, poverty within settlements and harmful practices such as child marriages will continue being perceived as Roma "tradition".

---

## Organizations in the settlements are sometimes the only way to understand the “outside” world | Bosnia and Herzegovina

The [Association for Development and Education of Youth ‘Safe Step’](#) is a youth-led collective based in Bijelina, Bosnia and Herzegovina. They joined FRIDA as a grantee partner in 2017. Founded by young Roma and non-Roma men and women, the Association is located within a community where the majority of the population is Roma. Based on the needs of the community where they operate, the members decided to establish an office devoted to providing counseling and different types of support to Roma people. I reached out to Begzada Jovanović, the leader of the Office for Roma Affairs who shared that the need to establish the Association arose from the multitude of challenges that Roma people, especially girls and young women, face in the community.

*“Our idea was to establish the association and to work on the promotion of culture and tradition, to encourage women to be more active in society, to fight and demand their rights, to be informed about violence, to contribute towards their literacy; here, unfortunately the rate of illiteracy is extremely high; to help young people to stay in the city to help girls and women – especially girls because here girls at the age of 12 are already in unofficial marriages. The parents arrange their marriages...”*

Similar to the stories of interviewees from other countries, Begzada shared that systemic discrimination and poverty pushes Roma to the margins of society. The practice of marrying girls at a young age at the expense of their education, limits their possibilities for financial independence in the future. Moreover, since 2010, when citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina can travel to Schengen countries without a visa, there has been a [surge in the number of Roma people who migrate to Western European countries to work, or try to claim asylum](#). Upon their return however, the countries have not incorporated any supporting mechanisms to ease their return into their homes. Begzada shared that the reason for the high numbers of migrants is the lack of employment opportunities in their home country and returnees face a number of difficulties, such as losing their health insurance.

*“Since the borders opened, Roma people have been leaving in massive numbers. They go for 3 months, 6 months and then they come back in which time they lose their health insurance because they haven’t registered at the unemployment office which causes a huge problem. Women give birth in their homes; they cannot go to the doctor; they do not have money to pay hospital bills. The unemployment rate is very high. People from majority populations are unemployed as well but when I say that about the Roma community it means that there are around 160 families with around 500 people in Bjelina and only 7 people are employed. So how can it be strange to see Roma women with their children begging on the streets, or gathering plastic bottles and paper?”*

Considering the low literacy rates that Begzada mentioned, and the lack of support from State institutions, it is not surprising that the people who live in the communities reach out to the Association to ask for different kinds of support. Begzada herself has lived in the community, so people have a lot of trust and faith that the members of the Association can support them with whatever issue they face.

*“Whatever happens to the people in the community, they come here immediately. They receive a letter or something from an institution, they come here. We offer advisory and legal support, whenever we can. We use our knowledge gained from different workshops or training and try to help. When we cannot then we contact the institutions in which jurisdiction it falls. We have good cooperation with the state institutions, like the municipality, which is the center for social work and police services.”*

---

The activists working in the Association through their grassroots experience have already established good working relationships with State institutions. Moreover, with the knowledge that they have acquired through their informal training, they can work to strengthen the capacities of the Roma people living in the communities. Having a physical office within the neighborhood where they operate has proven particularly useful since it gives people a sense of security, a place where they can reach out and access help. The unjust treatment of Roma people is especially visible in State institutions, and, considering the low rates of literacy, people can often be turned down when asking for assistance, or perhaps they might not feel confident enough to ask. In these cases, the grassroots collectives based within the neighborhoods are sometimes the only support system that Roma people can hope to receive.

## Early marriages as an outcome of poverty and gender discrimination | Montenegro

In 2018 I had the pleasure of meeting Fatima Naza, one of the founders of the [Center for Roma Initiatives](#), based in Niksic Montenegro. Fatima is a Roma feminist and is one of the instigators of introducing Roma and Egyptian feminist activism in Montenegro. As Fatima shared, when they started with their activism, they had to discover the reason for the lack of Roma and Egyptian women activists in Montenegro and the issues that they, as a newly-founded collective, have to tackle in the communities.

*“We had to discover which is the main problem why there are no Roma women activists engaged. We saw that it was because of early marriages, the virginity tradition etc. And we decided first to tackle this if we want Roma girls and women educated and employed, fighting against violence. Violence is also a big problem for the Roma and Egyptian community resulting from early marriages.”*

The issue of early marriages, or cohabitating with a partner from a young age, affects Roma girls living in Roma settlements across the whole region, as many of the interviewees pointed out. While some consider it to be part of the Roma tradition and culture, research shows that there is a direct correlation between [poverty and traditional gender roles, and early marriages/cohabitation arrangements](#). Connecting the virginity of young girls to the honor of the family along with the extreme poverty which affects many Roma people living in settlements, limits the opportunities of Roma girls and restricts them to assume only the role of mother and caregiver. From her field experience, Fatima shared a short account of the prevalence of early marriages in the settlements and their efforts to stop these practices.

*“When a girl is 12, 13 years old they are already preparing her for marriage and in the 6th, 7th, 8th grade they marry her off so she doesn't lose her virginity. And they sell her in a foreign country for an amount of 500, 600, 1000, 15000 euros and if the girl is not a virgin they return her and she is subjected to violence. That is a huge complex problem... There is the story of a girl of 13 years old whose wedding we stopped and we returned her home but the parents married her again when she was 16 years old because that is allowed by law. They married her because they owed 6000 euros... We have a big number of married girls in foreign countries and no one knows where they are. That is human trafficking that cannot be proved because our criminal law is not good. Our organization now, thanks to our donors, has the opportunity to tackle these issues. But what will happen when funding stops?”*

Project funding keeps activists in a constant state of fear because the lack of funds means that their efforts to stop the practice of early marriage can come to an end at any given time. When a project finishes, activists are aware that any progress that they have achieved for the duration of the project, can

---

be easily eradicated and no real change will be achieved on a community level. Moreover, Roma feminists working in these communities often put themselves at risk when trying to interfere with the parents' will to marry off their daughters and although they are at times successful, there are no sustainable mechanisms to protect the girls whose marriages have been prevented. Authorities are not always cooperative, since they perceive such practices as part of Roma culture and girls are often subjected to different kinds of violence by their families in cases when outsiders interfere with the arranged marriage. Parents can also decide to delay the wedding or find another partner at a later date.

*"We had and still have many difficulties within our community. Because we are bringing the issues to the local authorities and we want the laws to be implemented, something which some of the Roma leaders are against, but we also now have positive leaders, young boys and men students with whom we are cooperating and who are convinced that education is key to becoming free from the bad practices claimed as Roma tradition... We have great cooperation with certain individuals from the police. If it wasn't for these individuals we would not be able to speak freely about certain issues. From 2012 until 2018 we had 59 cases where we stopped children's arranged marriages and we worked on activities and projects on the same topic. There is resistance from the community and the majority because we are the first ones to deal with this topic."*

One of the most pressing challenges that Fatima brought up for young Roma women's organizing, aside from the backlash faced by community members, is the need for long-term financial support. The Center offers different kinds of support to the Roma communities where they are operating and builds the capacities of young people through their activities and programs. However, as Fatima shares, short-term project funding means lack of stability, limited space and expertise i.e. staff, and less opportunities to keep young people engaged.

*"It is very important for us to have continuous financial support. We deal with different kinds of issues, some, as I mentioned, are dangerous ones. But luckily we have the protection of our families and local authorities. We are very visible and active in the community but also outside of it. For example, we need finances to keep young employees engaged. We have local coordinators who work on identifying the victims of child arranged marriages in the field and work on other activities in accordance with the projects.. They are becoming experts in the field. And just when they become experts you have to let them go because of finances. And when we don't have finances to keep them employed how can we expect them to be engaged voluntarily? Moreover, all of us here deal with different kinds of issues, we are not specialized or responsible only for one issue. We could use more people in the office and more space. When a victim of violence comes here we have to go out so she can speak to the psychologist"*

Child and early marriages of Roma girls is a complex issue that grassroots collectives tackle in a way that is specific to the communities in which they work. And while they have been successful in raising awareness on the consequences of early marriage and even decreasing the number of married Roma girls, the backlash from the community along with lack of financial support, reduce the sustainability of their programs and puts activists' lives at risk. Furthermore, through their activities, collectives include as many young Roma women as possible to strengthen their capabilities and train them to become experts in the field. This however can only last as long as the project funding allows.

In 2022, I had the opportunity to reconnect with the Center for Roma Initiatives. I found that in the past 10 years they have received 7 awards, 5 of which are internationally recognized. Moreover, since conducting the interview, the Center has received continuous financial support from donors, which has led to their relocating to a bigger office space, strengthening their organizational capacities and deepening their crucial work.

---

## Roma girls are at a crossroads | Albania

*Irena Majko: "Unfortunately, Romani girls' lives and experiences in Albania are described as one-dimensional, monolithic or even homogeneous. For me this is problematic because silence dismisses their voice, creating a normative experience and construct of womanhood. Their experiences are different depending on many factors. Their lives are shaped by their gender, ethnicity, class (social, economic and educational status). The multiple layers of discrimination which affect Romani women's everyday lives, make them different from Roma men and very different from non-Roma women and men."*

To get a glimpse into the situation of Roma girls and young women in Albania, I reached out to Manjola Veizi, the founder and president of the [Roma Women Rights Center](#) in Tirana, Albania, and Irena Majko, a young Roma feminist activist from Albania. I held the interview with Manjola in two parts: we met in person in a cafe in Tirana where we started our discussion; however, due to being interrupted by sudden live music, we decided to continue the interview online. As for Irena, I reached out to her at quite a stressful time, considering that she was conducting her own research and writing her [Master thesis](#) on the division of labor within Roma households in Albania, focusing on how couples negotiate household labor and childrearing. Fortunately, Irena agreed to answer my interview questions and send her answers in writing.

Similarly to other countries, both Manjola and Irena shared that the situation of Roma girls and women differs in urban and rural contexts, and it's very difficult to provide a general image of the issues that they face on a national level. Child and early marriages, accompanied by gender based violence, resulting in dropping out of the education system are issues frequently present in rural areas or Roma settlements. And as Irena points out, there is another reality of highly educated Roma women who continue to face discrimination and unjust treatment by the majority population, and thus lack employment opportunities.

*Manjola: "There are differences in rural and urban areas. For Roma and non Roma as well. The communities that are isolated from the mainstream think that literacy is enough. They see that she (a girl) knows how to write her name, she knows how to count and that's enough. Now she has to learn how to cook, how to clean, and how to take care of the home. Even if a young woman wants to divorce or doesn't want to obey the rules of the other family, her family does not support her. She is considered illiterate, she has no place to go, she doesn't know how to access services, she cannot get custody of her children, so she has no choice but to stay with the husband. Today, in some places, girls are engaged from 11 years old and I cannot do anything. Sometimes I even want to go to the police. And I know that even if I go, the police will not handle the case properly because they don't have an understanding of the context, they don't see things as I do. Parents see marriage as the best thing to happen to their daughters. These issues were created centuries ago so you cannot change them through one training."*

*Irena: "In my opinion, Romani girls in Albania are at a crossroads because they are negotiating for their rights inside and outside of the community. There are two realities, (at least) which I am familiar with. I know many Romani girls, who are coming from what we are used to call traditional families who suffer the patriarchal rules of the community, preventing them from having access to education and forcing them to early marriages. I also know well-educated Romani girls who are still subject to subjugation of those internalized patriarchal rules, who do not have access to proper health care, are discriminated against in the labor market, are perceived as not well-qualified for any type of job and are still labeled 'the others' by the majority."*

Discriminatory attitudes towards Roma people are widespread in the country and these attitudes are especially visible when it comes to people without stable employment and lack of information and knowledge. Manjola points out that the Center focuses a lot of their effort on stopping the practice of

---

displacing Roma children into social care institutions because of poverty. Roma parents facing many social economic issues engage themselves and their children in begging due to the lack of basic living needs. The center has been advocating with relevant institutions to coordinate their actions and empower Roma parents, instead of placing their children in institutions. Furthermore, as Irena points out, Roma girls and women's opportunities are extremely limited due to first - the patriarchal practices prevalent in the communities, and second the societal perceptions of what they are capable of and what they should be allowed to do.

*Manjola: "There are issues of placing Roma children in childcare institutions (social services) and many times the procedure of placing the children there are not done correctly; and according to the law, the family should be empowered because the best interest of the child sometimes is not to be sent to an institution but to stay with their biological families. So we have cases where the children are taken and they are not given back to the families because even to take them back you have to be empowered and it's a very complicated issue. Children are adopted without the consent of the parents".*

*Irena: "Roma girls are discriminated against within the community due to their gender. They are the ones who dropout of school earlier in order to be prepared for the 'real womanly duty' – to maintain the household. They are expected to get married at an earlier age than men, moving from childhood to adulthood very fast. Moreover, some of them are socialized in that way to ensure that they perceive themselves as inferior to the power of men. Although, we should be aware that this is something which is not only relevant to the Roma minority in Albania. On the other hand, when we look at their experiences outside of the community, we see how gender, ethnicity and class are interplayed. They face the judgmental and stereotypical attitudes of the Albanian society every day, which exposes them to a whole different package of discriminatory experiences as the lack of a proper access to education, healthcare systems and labor markets. At the moment I am writing my thesis on division of labor and I conducted many interviews with Roma women in Albania and most of them stated that although they would like to work as babysitters or cook's assistants, they could not because the majority did not trust their ability to take care of and educate a child or cook and clean properly. They are perceived as "the other" women, not integrated women or not-qualified ones."*

By holding informative sessions and capacity strengthening workshops, as well as offering free legal support, the Center aims to empower Roma women and girls and enable them to exercise their rights. Moreover, the Roma Women Rights Center has established the "Roma and Egyptian Women Network" with the goal of uniting and supporting feminist activists in Albania. Financial support is naturally one of the key factors that contributes to building sustainable movements. Even though grassroots Roma women-led collectives have been successful in implementing activities that have proved beneficial for their respective communities, funding doesn't reach them very often. The reasons for this are that many collectives are organizing in an informal way outside of the registered NGOs, a sector which is not always recognized and does not always have many funding opportunities. Also, collectives are not always visible, and their efforts are not always recognized on a national or international level which limits their opportunities to receive funding.

Furthermore, as Manjola shares, there is a monopolized sector in which renowned organizations and/or activists can vouch for themselves through their work, and thus are more likely to be granted funds than people who are just starting in the field. This more often discourages Roma girls and young women to self-organize and choose to join an existing collective instead.

*Manjola: "When I established the organization I already had communication with many women and I had the support. But the difficulty was running for projects. Because as you know, to apply for projects the new NGOs are in a more disadvantaged position. Even there, there is a monopolized sector. So to get in was difficult. The good thing*

---

*was that I had already been working with several international organizations so I had the experience and I was well known in the field.”*

The crossroads that Roma girls and young women are positioned at, is one with too many obstacles for them to take on by themselves. Grassroots collectives are well positioned to attempt to ease some of those obstacles, however as Manjola shared, the requirements of funders puts new collectives at a serious disadvantage in their access to funding opportunities. Potential avenues in the funding landscape are blocked due to lack of recognised experience and expertise which halts the progress of grassroots activism and discourages the attempts at the self-organization of Roma girls and young women.

## **A unified approach to Roma issues does not exist | Bulgaria**

In Sofia, Bulgaria I met Teodora Krumova, a Roma activist and one of the founders of the [Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance “Amalipe”](#) located in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria. The center, which started as a student initiative consisting mostly of Roma students to gather information and preserve the Roma cultural heritage, has gained a reputation for being one of the most successful Roma initiatives in the country. Through their efforts, around 300 Bulgarian elementary schools are equipped with textbooks and can offer an elective course on Roma culture which describes the traits of all the Bulgarian Roma groups and their connection to the Bulgarian culture.

*Amalipe* has recognized the access to quality education, health care and social services as the most pressing issues, as well as the impact that harmful traditional practices have on the lives of Roma girls and women. Through their capacity strengthening programs, *Amalipe* aims to encourage young people from marginalized communities to self-organize and be active contributors to the developing Roma movement. Like many of the Roma-led organizations in the region, *Amalipe* has experienced their fair share of difficulties, however they overcame the challenges by working together with the communities and tailoring their approach, instead of introducing solutions by themselves.

*“You need to tailor your approach according to the specific culture of the group. Because you cannot have a unified approach. It's really hard to change the perceptions in the community... Our approach is that you have to make people want the things to become better for them and to realize it's in their own hands. There is nobody from outside that will come and change your lives. We have moderators in the community who point out the problems, because when you live in the community the challenges are so embedded in your everyday life that you don't realize that you have them, and the moderators are there to offer assistance in the institutions or wherever assistance is needed... One of the issues that we are very hard on is education of girls and early marriages. It's not in all the communities but in many of the communities it is still an issue; in different dimensions with different reasons but it still exists. In some of the communities it's the parents who initiate the marriage, however recently the tendency is that it's not the parents anymore but the young people.”*

As [Amalipe's research](#) on preventing early marriages shows, the issue of early marriages or cohabiting with a partner from an early age is still present in some Roma communities, and oftentimes it is the decision of the teenage girls to leave their parents' household and not their parents' decision. A major issue that arises from early marriages is that the girls do not complete their education which consequently limits their employment opportunities. *Amalipe*, together with their student collaborators have come up with a creative solution to provide support to Roma girls in need.



---

*One element that we introduced is called student mentors. And this was in fact suggested by the students themselves. So whenever there is a child at risk somebody from the other peers becomes his or her mentor and helps this child overcome the risk, whatever the risk is. For example, we very often use this approach in cases of early marriage. First, we organize a lot of training and seminars to raise their awareness that early marriages are not good for them, and to make them recognize the signals of the act of early marriages taking place. Because they share with each other, whenever they come across some of their peers, usually girls, who say "I'm getting married", they also inform the teacher who is responsible and together they make a plan on how to react. They start to speak with this girl applying the right language and the right message. Also if we have a case when we haven't managed to help before the marriage then we do our best to get the girl back to school because usually the early marriages end very soon. And after this, the girl returns to her parents' home and she has two options to either get married again, usually they marry her to a divorced man or widower or a man with children for her to take care of, or if they don't marry her, she tries to go abroad, because she can't live in all this pressure and she usually goes somewhere where she doesn't know anybody and easily becomes a victim of trafficking. That is why we try to get them back to school. The school, with the support of other children, can help her overcome these problems. But in these cases it's easy for them to drop out again because when they come back they face a lot of violence from the other kids. In these cases we assign peer support to this girl to be her student mentor. Their role is to moderate within the group, classroom, and school in order to aid this re-entry into the school community. The mentors can be very helpful in many cases and this influence is significant for them as well. This process makes them responsible and they see that someone depends on them."*

The experiences that Teodora shared captivated me for several reasons. In their efforts to decrease the number of teenage marriages, Amalipe includes a variety of actors that can support Roma girls at risk. Instead of focusing only on the parents or the families, Amalipe, together with Roma student collaborators, have created a successful system within the schools that includes peers, as well as school staff. As Teodora mentions, in these cases peer support is especially important considering that teenagers would often not feel comfortable opening up to adults. Moreover, Amalipe doesn't only center their work towards preventing teenage marriages, but builds their programs to include reintegration of married girls, or girls who have been married, in the education system. Returning to school is essential for these girls, whose future upon marrying or divorcing is exceedingly limited.

*"You cannot go against the leaders openly, but you have to go very softly and try to change things without people understanding they are changing. For example, the Kalderashi are a very conservative community, but they are very market oriented. All of them have businesses, they have companies, so none of them becomes a teacher. They may also become lawyers or other such positions. They understand how useful it is for them to invest in their daughters' education, she becomes an accountant or a lawyer so she works for you instead of you taking someone from outside. This has been a way to change the community. Because when these girls go to university you cannot marry them off anymore. They insist on their right to choose their husband themselves. That's why you cannot separate the Roma women's issues from the community"*

The takeaway from the interview with Teodora is that changing the perceptions and attitudes of a community is impossible without considering the specifics of the groups therein. The successes of Amalipe are in large part owed to the knowledge and experience of the activists who tailor their programs according to the specific convictions of the groups with which they are working. In the example above, Teodora provides just one of the tactics that they have implemented to encourage parents to invest in their daughters' education. Roma women-led collectives need to have the space and liberty to implement their strategies in the context where they are operating, since they are the experts and the ones who know best.

## **Setting a Roma feminist agenda | Romania**

---

Back in 2018 I reached out to Mihaela Dragan and Carmen Gheorghe. Mihaela is an actress, playwright and one of the founding members of [‘Giuvlipen’ The Roma Women’s Theatre Company](#), and Carmen is a founding member and president of the [E-Romnja](#) association; both are based in Bucharest, Romania. Through different means such as art, academia, and by working directly with Roma communities who have been most affected by the systemic injustices of the majority population, both feminists fight for the same outcome: incorporating Roma women’s voices into the mainstream feminist agenda.

Before my conversation with Carmen, I hadn’t realized how mainstream feminism had influenced my own perception of what feminist issues are. Mainstream feminism frequently puts forward the issues of women whose basic needs have already been met. Breaking the glass ceiling, gender pay gap, women’s participation in politics are crucial issues that are not a priority to women with no access to safe drinking water, infrastructure, medical services or employment opportunities. For collectives working on a community level it is extremely important to hear what Roma women have to say. Instead of telling them what they should prioritize, Roma women-led collectives such as E-Romnja work to support Roma women in obtaining what they see as crucial for bettering their living situation.

*Carmen: “Something that Roma women taught us is that any issue that is seen through women’s eyes is a women’s issue. The feminist agenda was always set by women-specific issues, like reproductive rights, violence against women, giving birth, everything that concerns the woman’s body. But there was no discussion about women who live in extreme poverty, who have more than one identity – intersectionality, class, social status... all these kinds of issues. We were taught from the women in the community that having no proper roads is a women’s issue. Because they have to wash, they have to clean, they have to carry their children when there is mud, rain ...they are the ones responsible, whether we like it or not. So it’s our job to also deal with these kinds of issues. We always start from the premises that Roma women know best what their issues are, we never try to interfere in their prioritization, they are the ones who have to do that”*

*Mihaela: “Their [Roma women’s] specific issues have to be addressed in feminist spaces. White feminists need to give space to the voice of Roma women. At this moment in Romania it’s not happening. Besides the financial support, Roma women need more space for their voices to be heard in mainstream environments.”*

Both Carmen and Mihaela agree that the voices and perspectives of Roma women are currently missing from feminist spaces. It is critical to incorporate their voices into the mainstream because Roma women’s experiences greatly differ from non-Roma women, and they face unequal treatment and obstacles that non-Roma women don’t. The hostile public discourse attached to their ethnicity pushes Roma women to the margins where their issues are disregarded. The support that Roma women-led collectives provide to women in the Roma communities is not limited only to provision of direct services. Instead, these collectives aim to spread knowledge and empower Roma women to stand up for themselves, bring their issues to the responsible people or State bodies, and resolve the issues that they themselves prioritize.

*Mihaela: “Poverty is always a challenge for Roma because discrimination always pushes them towards poverty. Segregation in schools, lack of education, limited knowledge of sexual and reproductive rights are all consequences of poverty; these also tie strongly into the issue of early marriage. In Romania there are even segregated rooms at some hospitals for Roma women and most of them don’t even have insurance to go to the doctor. In recent years there was hateful discourse from politicians about sterilizing Roma women because they produce too many Roma children. This is why I think that Roma women’s issues differ from general women’s issues. It’s also an ethnic identity that makes them more vulnerable in society. It looks like there is no room for Roma women. And it depends very much on the material situation. Many of them emigrate to the Western countries. Many of them work as beggars in Sweden or Norway or just do low income jobs in Germany, Italy, or Spain.”*

---

Carmen: *“What we do on a community level is to support these women’s voices to become louder, to become more courageous and to discuss with authorities and people in the communities. We support Roma women’s groups, we build these initiatives groups who have independent ideas and their own structure and way of organizing; and we are partners with them and we work together with them to achieve different goals. For example if they say they have an issue with infrastructure then we act on that. We have this ethic of working. We never go in a community and say that we will teach Roma women what to do or what they need. If they say, “We need infrastructure, education or health care, what should we do?” We never tell them “No, think about women’s issues, reproductive rights or violence against women etc?”*

In many of the previous conversations, the interviewees emphasized the significance of the difference in contexts when unraveling Roma women’s issues, especially within urban vs. rural contexts. Mihaela and Carmen go even further in noting the diversity within the Roma communities and the awareness that activists entering the field need to have. All of the factors, including place of residence, group of descent, religion, class, social standing, need to be taken into consideration since, based on these factors, Roma women face different issues.

Mihaela: *“In Bucharest, the situation is different than in other cities or villages in Romania where Roma people are living. From what I see and what I know, in every community that you go to, Roma people are also very different. There are different groups of Roma, with different hand crafts, they have different issues...”*

Carmen: *“We work in four communities now and in each community we have established an initiative group formed by women. There is a lot of diversity among the groups, there are Pentecostal women, there are Orthodox, Adventist women among the same group, so there is also diversity in terms of religion, which can be complicated sometimes, and there is also diversity among classes, there are people who are wealthier and Roma who come from different groups of descent. So sometimes it is also a challenge to put Roma from different groups of descent in the same group.”*

As a Roma women-led collective raising awareness about the issues affecting Roma girls and women through what many consider radical means, the financial and emotional support of feminist funds such as FRIDA was important for the collective to persist. Through their plays, Giuvlipen unravels the multifold discrimination to which Roma girls are subjected by their patriarchal communities and by the majority populations.

Mihaela Dragan: *“Giuvlipen was founded as a cultural organization. We are Roma professional actresses in Romania and we founded the group in 2014 and actually we started with FRIDA. FRIDA was our first donor. At that moment it was everything that we needed, someone to believe in us and support our work...We had a lot of support from the feminist scene. The support including the financial support that we received was from the feminist side, like FRIDA, or from the cultural side, with no involvement in human rights issues... My advice is to always give them [newly founded Roma women’s organizations] emotional support and show appreciation, show them that their work matters and they can really make a change. When they feel that their work is valued and appreciated I think they will continue working”*

Similarly to Mihaela, Carmen highlights the need for emotional and capacity strengthening support for Roma girls and young Roma women. Roma women’s voices have been suppressed for so long that many might feel insecure to stand up against the systems that place them in a subjugated position.

Carmen: *“It’s a reality that women cannot express and manifest themselves when men are around. At least in the beginning and at least for two or three years when you have to work with women to raise the self esteem for them to believe in their strength and after that moment they are able to sit at the same table with men. Sometimes I’m*

---

*just surprised why people are so shocked by the fact that Roma women don't have enough strength to sit at the same table with Roma men and have discussions. Because there is such a strong history of oppression of Roma women and of course they could not sit immediately to speak with men at the same table... it would not happen. It's a reality. Of course I don't like it. I'm a feminist I believe that women have a lot of power and strength but the reality is different and then you have to start from this reality."*

Mihaela and Carmen emphasized the difference in challenges that Roma and non-Roma women face, and the discrimination and racism that Roma women face from non-Roma women. Due to the difference of experiences, the need for Roma women-led collectives is apparent. And while Roma feminists continue establishing their own agenda, that doesn't mean that they should be excluded from the mainstream feminist movement. Instead, mainstream feminists must make room in their spaces to incorporate the voices of Roma women.

## Network = Movement | Greece

I finished the series of in-person interviews in Xanthi, Greece, where I met Sabiha Suleiman - the epitome of the Greek Roma women's movement. Sabiha is the founder of the [Roma Women's Association of Drosero 'Elpida'](#) located in the heart of Drosero, a neighborhood in Xanthi populated mainly by Roma inhabitants.

Upon arriving in Thessaloniki, Greece from Bucharest, Romania, I traveled by car with a young English-Greek translator. On our way from Xanthi to Drosero, we couldn't make sense of the directions so we decided to ask the first person we saw on the street. After some time driving in circles we saw a woman and the translator asked her how to get to Drosero. The woman looked at both of us very curiously and asked: "Drosero? You mean the neighborhood of the Roma?" to which the translator answered affirmatively. She explained how to continue our way but finished with: "Be very careful there with the Roma". Of course I have always known that people don't often associate the color of my skin with my ethnicity, but in this case I felt sad that people just assume the worst of Roma people; and then I couldn't hold my laughter at the fact that they are warning a Roma to beware of the Roma.

This short exchange already gave me a sense of the relationship between the Roma people of Drosero and the neighboring non-Roma people. Upon our arrival in Drosero, Sabiha was waiting for us outside of the 'Elpida' office and gave us a tour of the space. She showed us the kindergarten – the only one that the children of the neighborhood have access to, and the remaining rooms - some of which are set up as classrooms where they organize classes for adults. Despite 'Elpida's' attempts to raise the quality of life of Roma people within the neighborhood, by fighting to keep children in the education system as well as organize trainings for adults to increase their chances of employment, the collective has faced backlash due to their unwillingness to be coerced into [political manipulations](#).

*The community recognizes the work that we are doing. They understand that we are here to help children, as well as adults, to be accepted as full members of society. But some men are openly against me because I couldn't be coerced into giving up the Roma identity and identify with other ethnicities here. So these men do not allow their wives and daughters to speak to me, let alone participate in our activities. But they do it anyway. Not in front of their husbands, but when they are alone they tell me about their problems and how appreciative they are of our work. They say 'please don't get mad if I don't speak to you while I'm with him' or 'he won't be at home tomorrow, so I will try to come to the workshop'. Women don't just accept blindly everything that is being said to them. They have their own mind. But if they don't obey, they will have to face dire consequences. And do you think anyone will come to their defense?*

---

The lack of mutual trust among Roma people and the Greek authorities was confirmed in 2013 through a case that reached international headlines, where the police found the [“non-Roma looking girl” named Maria living with Roma parents](#). The immediate assumption by the authorities was that the Roma parents had abducted the girl from her non-Roma family. And while all eyes were following the unraveling of the case, Sabiha shared the stories that didn't reach the headlines.

*“After the case with the blond girl Maria, which surely you will remember, the police were going through Roma settlements to search for other blond children who they would assume were abducted by Roma people. They also came to Drosero, in the early hours of the morning, waking people up, forcibly entering people's houses to see if there were blond children inside. At one point even I got scared because my niece is blond, so I didn't know what might be in their heads. They might think that we have stolen her.”*

Sabiha is fighting the systems of oppression which keep the Roma in a subjugated position; she fights the non-Roma people who make the already difficult lives of Roma impossible; and she also fights the patriarchy within the settlements encouraged by the inability of the competent authorities to act and protect the citizens.

*I didnt start with activism for myself. I got involved with activism to try to prevent certain practices from happening. I want to prevent girls from being subjected to violence; prevent girls from being married off at the age of 13. The reality is that our women here are not seen or treated as equals to men. But when they don't have other options, when they don't go to school then they have only one choice. To get married, to have children, to work, to beg. That is the option.*

Sabiha's passion and fierceness to fight for her community has driven her to use some creative methods, such as standing in line all day in a municipal office to see how officials are treating Roma vs non-Roma people and demand justice on the spot. Fighting the good fight in Greece however, has proven to be a lonely activity. Dealing with constant backlash, 'Elpida' is in need of partnerships and feminist networks that will support them and will hear their experiences, as well as share positive practices from their own contexts.

*Currently, we are lucky to have the finances to implement the most urgent projects that are requested by the community. Of course there is always a need for more, but we are satisfied. What we miss now, and we have struggled with from the beginning, is having partners in Greece and throughout Europe, to be part of a network of women's organizations; to have a support system, to be able to ask for help with different kinds of things, to share positive practices and experiences. And I know that we can also provide our expertise and be one of the links for the voices of Greek Roma women to reach at least the region, since as you might have noticed, Roma women from Greece are very often invisible on a national and international level*

The interview with Sabiha left me with a feeling of admiration for her work . Still to this day I am not sure whether that is because I had no prior knowledge of the situation of Roma women in Greece, or because of Sabiha's resilience that showed me how one woman is carrying a whole movement on her shoulders despite the lack of support. The need for establishing a Roma women's network in the region came up in so many of the interviews that I conducted but none so much as in the interview with Sabiha. Working without much support is very common for Roma organizations, but it has a deep effect on activists and the sustainability of their work.

**The situation is improving, just not fast enough | Kosovo**

---

To learn more about the issues that Roma girls and young women from Kosovo face, I reached out to Mimoza Gavrani, a young Roma feminist activist from Prishtina, Kosovo. Mimoza has extensive grassroots experience, and has been involved in governmental policy development aimed at improving the situation of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian minorities from Kosovo. Moreover she is one of the founding members and leader of the Kosovo Advocacy Group - KAG. I held the interview with Mimoza online, and throughout our conversation, she drew from her grassroots experience to explain the situation of Roma girls and women in Kosovo.

*“Roma women in Kosovo, and I don’t think I will be wrong in saying in the Balkans, face double discrimination – inside their house, outside their circle and in everyday life. Each social problem tackles them two times. I cannot compare a Serbian woman who comes from a certain village with her neighbor who is Roma, they simply don’t have the same level of problems. Because if the Serbian woman is not employed, at least her husband, as far as I know from my field work, is not emotionally or verbally mistreating her, is not using domestic violence. But for the Roma women, it’s acceptable to use violence, it’s acceptable to marry off your daughter at 13. Why? Just because they would need that 2000 euros, or 5000 euros or I don’t know how much to get from the people that they give their daughter to and plus they have some weird sense of security of having their daughter married there and with 15, 16 years of age she will be a mom, and this is how at the starting point, at the period of her life where she is supposed to grow up in a proper way she destroys her health. And at 20, 25 she has a lot of problems that a regular woman, or the Serbian woman who is her neighbor, is not having even at 45 years old.”*

The comparison that Mimoza provides shows that even in the same context, in this example a rural environment, Roma girls and women face different issues from their non-Roma neighbors. In these rural contexts, Roma families still engage in the practice of marrying their daughters at a young age and accepting payment from their in-laws, and very often the practice is seen as a means to improve their financial situation. Girls subjected to marriage are expected to become mothers before they are physically and emotionally ready, with little or no knowledge on sexual and reproductive health. [Early marriages not only increase the risks of becoming victims to gender-based violence, but also increase the risks to their health.](#)

*“There are huge differences between rural and urban contexts. That goes without saying. The mentality, the social stigma, the way people perceive things have a huge impact. I cannot compare a woman who comes from Pristina or Gjakova who is seeking help, even though there are some cases now which are being reported, but not many of them. I cannot compare that woman with a woman who comes from a deeper village and who can’t even go to the police because she needs to walk, I don’t know how many kilometers, and that is the primary condition that somehow stops her. And we never know in what health condition that woman is, keeping in mind that still we have births at home, they don’t have proper mechanisms or possibilities, or access to information about the opportunities that they have for regular gynecological check ups and other checkups in general.”*

Naturally, as it was pointed out in other interviews, Mimoza shares that Roma girls and women who live in rural environments face different challenges from those living in urban areas. Women from rural areas do not have the same access to well-equipped facilities, different kinds of services, and support from the authorities as those from urban areas have. And while these are issues that affect both Roma and non-Roma women, Roma women have to battle discriminatory practices at home as well as outside when trying to access information, or services.

*“In general, Roma women have many issues Unfortunately, we cannot today call upon many successes that Roma women have achieved so far against the system. But when I project the situation from the ground, if the husbands would scream or commit acts of psychological or physical violence they would accept it as a part of the general culture and they would accept it in different ways. There are many organization working on this and we still have*

---

*such a high amount of discrimination; we still have a high number of girls being married against their will. We have young marriages, domestic violence, unemployment at a high rate; we have no businesses owned and led by women, and we have a lot of issues in education as well. Even though Roma access funds are also active in Kosovo and they have a good cooperation with the ministry of education, there are still other women, girls who don't know about this opportunity. There are also no existing mechanisms to follow up on a daily basis on their results. But at the same time I think that, if I compare the situation before the war and now, there are changes, there are small changes. For example when I started to study there were almost no women who had a BA degree. There were only some. Maybe in the whole country there were 2 or 3. But today, there are a lot of them who have BA degrees but they have not been able to find a job or the economic conditions have somehow forced them to get married and even though they have a degree they don't use it."*

The rise in the number of educated young Roma women activists contributes towards improving the situation of Roma girls and young Roma women. And even though there are opportunities and the situation has improved in the last years, Mimoza shares that change is not coming fast enough. Harmful practices, falsely normalized as traditions, are deeply embedded into the everyday life of Roma girls and young women living in Roma communities.

## **Feminist Empowerment through Sisterhood - Arhanghella's experiences as a Roma trans woman | Romania**

Despite the common theme of intersectionality in previous interviews, the intersection between gender identity, race and ethnicity was not explicitly addressed. Considering that the [rights of LGBTQIA+ people in Southeastern Europe continue to be under constant threat](#), I wanted to learn more about the experiences of Roma trans women in the region. After asking for recommendations, I got in touch with Arhanghella, a Roma trans woman from Romania. I met Arhanghella virtually and was inspired by her bravery and motivation to carve out spaces in the public for Roma trans women. Arhanghella is an artist – a painter and sculptor – who started her activism after being invited to join the feminist theater group by one of Giuvlipen's founders, Mihaela Dragan.

*I was a huge fan of Mihaela, even before my transition. My mind was blown when I saw that there was a Roma feminist theater in my country. I was so excited to talk with them, and always promoted their work. I met Mihaela on the street one day when I was in the university and she invited me to participate in their plays. We became very good friends, and then I started my transition which she was very supportive of. I am so thankful for the sorority that we have... I'm a very theatrical person – with my looks, with the way I talk – she really believed in me so she invited me to join a project in which I portray the story of a character named Bianca. She wanted it to be portrayed by a trans woman since Bianca is non-binary. It was so empowering for me and now I'm very excited to work more in theater and be active in the community. I'm from a small village, so, through my work I'm aiming to show kids from small cities and villages that they can do this. I used to think that acting as a woman in theater spaces was impossible. But now that I'm doing it I feel like I should empower the new generation. Giuvlipen expanded my horizons. We [trans women] are not accepted in many places, but there are some safe spaces for us where we are accepted.*

As Arhanghella shares, her activism started due to the inspiring work of a Roma feminist collective in Romania which shows the importance of visibility of activists' work; especially for girls and young

---

women who want to challenge the deeply-rooted patriarchal narrative in their communities. Considering the constraints imposed to Roma girls and women, and the invisibility of women, especially queer women, in public spaces, it's not surprising that many young women and girls are not aware of the freedoms and opportunities that they can explore. Having women like Arhanghella who share their success stories, experiences and challenges and publicly oppose the predetermined systems is crucial to bring hope to the rising generation of activists.

*Besides funds, we need stronger unity and visibility. Many people don't even believe that they can be involved in activist work because the opportunities are not very visible. It's crucial for young people to be able to see queer people in physical and digital spaces. It's crucial for them to see that queer people exist and that they can be celebrated without being sexualized. We need a bigger platform to showcase ourselves and our talents. To show that we can do this and other people can do this as well, and they will be seen and appreciated. Most of the time we are purposely hidden and not even taken into consideration. That's the reality.*

Even though Arhanghella would rather focus on the positive experiences rather than the challenges of her activism, she shared that trans Roma activists have to overcome many limitations in their activist work. One major challenge is the sexualization of Roma women that limits the opportunities available for Roma women. Considering the hyper-sexualized depictions of Roma women in popular culture and the fetishization of trans women, their activist work is often undermined and unappreciated.

*One really big issue that we are facing is sexualizing Roma and Roma trans women. People just have this idea of Roma women being these fiery lovers that they desire. Moreover, as a trans woman a lot of people sexualize you for your body and being their secret fantasy. In general people minimize everything about us, and make everything about our appearance, or about our sexuality, or about our bodies. Due to the discrimination, racism, and transphobia - it was very hard for me to find places that don't see labels. And one of the places where I have never experienced this is my new workplace where the CEO is a Roma woman.. Even though when I joined it was a shock for all the other women who were already working there because our CEO had never collaborated with a trans woman and some of them had never even met a trans individual, I was so welcomed. Since they have also been discriminated against and they would never do that to me. It's so important for us to stay united and be a support for one another.*

Coupled with the issue of hyper-sexualization and fetishization of trans Roma women, racist attitudes continue to harm activists in their personal and professional lives. As Arhanghella shared, racism and transphobia have been so ingrained in society that they are not very often recognized as hateful behaviors, and are even perceived as acceptable. As she mentions in the excerpt below, until it was pointed out to her, she wouldn't have been able to say that she had experienced discrimination based on her ethnicity or her gender identity.

*I often say that I'm really privileged that I don't feel exclusion for being a trans Roma woman. Before this interview I was discussing with Mihaela and I recognized that I'm actually used to normalizing these behaviors. So I had to think hard and realized that not everything has been perfect in my life and I often look at things through "rose-colored glasses". And I think that's just a way of coping with reality. It's extremely hard. For example, there was a woman in the apartment building where I'm living who used to misgender me, and was calling me names because I am Roma, because I am trans, and she was very pushy. One time she even tried to block me in the elevator. But I just blocked this memory out of my head. I don't like responding to these behaviors with hate. That's how you show people that they don't have power over you, even if they do. I just try to make the best out of it and focus on what I want to do. I'm aware that people can get really violent with queer people, or simply with Roma women. Through my attitude I'm trying to show people that they are not my enemy and I am not theirs.*



---

Normalizing harmful practices and behaviors has a profound impact on how girls and women perceive themselves and the opportunities that they believe are available to them. The key to making girls and young women question their imposed restriction, according to Arhanghella, is connecting them with role models with whom they share similar experiences. As she shares, it's not enough to just speak to girls and young women about freedoms and opportunities that might seem inconceivable in their current contexts, but instead we need to encourage connections with women who come from a similar context, or have faced similar challenges and have overcome their obstacles.

*Young people are not in charge. You can't just go and tell girls that they can be free and can do whatever they want. That's not the reality. Some even don't think that this is possible because that's what they are taught and that's what they are seeing. We need to support young people to find their power. We need people with similar experiences to connect and encourage girls who are going through the same challenges as them. Through my activist work with Giuvlipen, through the platform that we have we try to give girls and young women courage and hope. But I cannot talk for people who have been forced into a marriage because I have never been through that. I can't go and tell them "oh it's easy - look at my experiences". Everyone goes through a specific set of challenges that cannot be addressed by people who have not lived them.*

Arhanghella's experiences shed light on so many intersecting challenges that trans Roma women experience in their everyday lives. However, one of the prevalent themes in our interview was that of resistance and the importance of sisterhood. The notion of being among like-minded people who have faced the same challenges as you, and knowing that you are in a safe space where you are accepted for who you are, is a big motivating factor for activists such as Arhanghella. It's so important to contribute towards the viability of feminist activist work and bring hope to girls and young women for whom safe spaces are an impossible idea. As long as there is unity, there is no challenge that activists will not be able to overpass.

## **Collaboration instead of Tokenism - Interview with Bianca Varga ∞, a non-binary Roma person | Romania**

The last interview that I conducted for this research, was with Bianca Varga ∞ (he/she/they<sup>6</sup>), a non-Binary Roma person from Romania. Considering that Bianca is the first Roma non-binary person I have met, the interview was a remarkable learning experience for me. I met Bianca online and the interview was conducted with the help of a translator. Even though the interview lasted for 3 hours, we managed to only scratch the surface of Bianca's experiences. Their activist journey started in their childhood, before even knowing that there was a term to describe their work.

*I am Iosif and Bianca, two in one at the same time, because one cannot exist without the other. I grew up in an orphanage and lived there until I reached the age of 18. My activism started from childhood, but I realized that there was a name for the work that I was doing [activism] at the age of 25. I started with my family from the orphanage, because when I left the orphanage I had many friends who needed help in getting documents and support from different institutions. I used to live in a social apartment and the maximum allowed people was 3, but usually I had*

---

<sup>6</sup> When I asked Bianca their pronouns, they told me that they use any of the 3 he/she/they. As they shared during the interview: "There is no community of non-binary people in Romania and I am still getting information about this and this is still a work in progress. I sometimes feel ok with Bianca, sometimes with Iosif - I feel comfortable with all of these identities, there is no set one. I'm still navigating my identity."

---

*more people there, at the risk of being evicted, because my friends needed support in navigating the world they were thrown into without any support. At the age of 26 I wanted to start doing this in a more visible way. When I got employed at the center for people with disabilities, I started doing Două pupeze negre or Two black chicks. My activism might not be visible but it's very necessary. I don't work only with non-binary people, but with trans people, Roma people, all people who need help.*

Interestingly, the interview with Bianca didn't start with my set of questions but rather their question directed to me, "What do you want me to focus on in this interview? You know that there are many challenges. Do you want me to focus on challenges in the judicial system, discrimination of Roma in education, employment, or maybe my own experiences?" Even though the question caught me by surprise, my answer was very quick, saying that this is their space and that we could focus on what they find most important. Throughout our interview, I found that Bianca has had several experiences in which activists and collectives have reached out to them to be a speaker or to cooperate on a project, but it turned out to be just an act of tokenism. They shared the following example with me:

*I was invited by an LGBT organization to talk about queerness and being queer. I was asked to speak only about a certain thing and push aside everything else, everything that matters to me. So I agreed but I didn't follow the "given script". I talked about what was important to me. Visibility is very important, but not visibility for the sake of it. Visibility that has an impact. I do things that people ask me to do, but I also add the things that I feel are important to be said and heard by people.*

Having been a human rights activist for many years, Bianca has had numerous occasions to cooperate with different people and collectives in the field. However as they share, there is a very high risk of tokenism; i.e. inviting Bianca - a non-binary Roma person to symbolically participate in certain events or projects to give the appearance of inclusivity. An invitation to collaborate is not always genuine, especially when there is no background information or knowledge about the motivation behind the cooperation.

*There are associations which are supposed to work on supporting Roma people, or LGBTI rights, but are mostly using people like me for their image. 70% of organizations that I've worked with work only to earn money for themselves. Not for doing helpful things. That's why I'm doing the project Două pupeze negre, because I wanted to present how real life is for Roma non-binary people. But without support it's very hard to do this, especially in the long-term. It's necessary for people like me to be more visible. Not more visible than other communities, but just as visible.*

Furthermore, when asked about who their allies in the field are, and which are the spaces that they feel most comfortable at, Bianca shared that there is no Roma non-binary community in Romania so they cannot fully identify with only one movement. They have felt appreciated and listened to in many feminist spaces, but have also had many experiences in which they realized that the real motivation behind the work conducted is the financial aspect, instead of the community work.

*I'm not sure if real cooperation, not the type that focuses on tokenism is possible. Thinking about the allies: I feel like that there is a connection and I'm listened to the most by feminist organizations like Giuvlipen - one of the real allies at the moment. Also, my experience with the 'Center for legal resources' was really great and I felt that I could really trust them. I don't really know which community I'm part of. I'm Roma and have some things in common with that community, but it would be really nice if people like me could be part of all of the communities at the same time, and not of only some categories. It's a bit silly that we keep so many categories when we feel that we fit in more categories. Unfortunately, some associations focus on only some issues going only where the money is - they do projects for communities only because there is available funding. They don't do things that have real impact.*

---

From previous interviews I found that Roma feminist activists who felt that their opinions and voices were not heard and respected, decided to create their own spaces where people with similar views and experiences could address and focus on the issues that they prioritized. However, as Bianca shares, considering the lack of a Roma non-binary community in the country they cannot identify with only one movement, and instead feel part of a number of movements. Their hope is that feminist activists will be able to unite under one cause, considering that they face many similar challenges. Incidentally, while discussing discriminatory attitudes towards Roma people, and non-binary people, Bianca had to step away for a moment to walk out a friend who was in their house. Upon their return they shared an example that happened in real time:

*Because my friend has darker skin than me, the Uber always refuses the ride - which just happened now. It's not only Uber. If you are anything outside of the accepted norm, then it's very difficult.*

Fighting against racism, discrimination and exclusion of people who are considered out of the gender binary, Bianca created Două pupeze negre or 'Two black chicks' a show broadcasted on social media portraying the lived realities of LGBTQI+ community members. Aside from entertainment, Bianca shared that the aim of the show was to address the missing LGBTQI+ voices from mainstream media and connect with people who face similar issues and would feel alone if they didn't hear these voices in public.

*The project started when the pandemic started. That's when I had more time to put into practice some ideas that I had for a long time. I used to post videos online so I already had an audience and I felt like there were people who were receptive to the message that I was sharing online. We decided to do something that was more visible and present topics that we were already discussing among ourselves. I got a loan from the bank to make the project happen. "Două pupeze negre" is not only entertainment, it's a place to show life the way it is. There was a need for real information drawn from immediate realities, this is what "Două pupeze negre" offered. Access to information, and content that presents reality. For people to see that they are not alone, that others also face similar issues. The program comes with direct solutions for feminists, Roma, people with disabilities, LGBTQI - to bring attention and encourage younger people that there is a common cause towards which people need to fight for. "Două pupeze negre" promotes what is beautiful and what is different; people who are special, who have special talents.*

Bianca's expertise and knowledge in the field of human rights comes from years of activist work and numerous first-hand experiences. Despite this, their skills are not always valued, and, as Bianca shared, cooperation with grassroots organizations can more often be interpreted as acts of tokenism instead of genuine collaboration. The reasons for this are lack of interest in the challenges that non-binary people encounter in their everyday life, and the belief that there are higher possibilities to receive financial support if donors see that people from diverse communities are part of the project activities. The lack of a non-binary movement in the region, and the knowledge that there are more uniting than dividing factors should serve as a motivation for feminist organizers to create more collaborative opportunities.

## Conclusion

From the conversations with Roma activists we came to understand the resilience of Roma feminist organizing in the region. Despite all systemically imposed barriers to keep them on the margins, Roma feminist organizers are still the main source of support and care to the Roma communities. However, even though some challenges differ from context to context, they still pivot strongly around the issues of racialized poverty, systemic discrimination and institutional and social violence. It must also be noted

---

that the marginalization of Roma is an intentional and deliberate attempt to push these communities to the peripheries of the cities. They battle on as oppressed people, living in difficult conditions without access to school systems or job opportunities; and no support from the governments in cases of violence, discrimination, child protection and basic human rights.

Roma women, girls and LGBTQA+ groups face multiple forms of discrimination and we need to understand the interlocking systems of oppression, how they intersect with one another and how they affect the lives of Roma communities. We need to incorporate these understandings into our grantmaking and accompaniment strategies to provide holistic support.

Roma feminists from Southeast Europe, regardless of their active involvement in feminist collectives, have made a major contribution in raising awareness about the issues specifically connected to Roma girls and young women; and breaking down the stereotypes among Roma and non-Roma that have impacted the way the Roma youth is perceived and treated. According to the interviewees there is still a very long way to go. The major work in support for Roma communities has been undertaken by very few grassroots collectives that operate with limited funding. This way of working is overwhelming for the collectives and leaves little space for movement building that would support joint advocacy, networking and exchange practices. This is one of the main reasons for more movement unity; cooperation among the collectives to achieve positive changes on an international level that would reach girls, women and LGBTQI+ youth from the most impoverished communities; something which has not been fully achieved among Roma feminist collectives.

So far there have been several attempts at creating an international Roma women's network, however our interviewees shared that it was difficult to sustain them. The inability to unite Roma feminists through a network is not a result of lack of interest or motivation, but lack of long term funding opportunities to cover the costs of regular regional meetings as well as employees responsible for information sharing and translation. While some find the solution in joining the mainstream feminist movement by incorporating Roma issues within the same, others, as our interviewees say, have been discouraged by the tendency of disregarding the specific challenges that Roma girls and women face in order to focus on broader feminist issues.

The invisibility of Roma women in Roma and feminist spaces has served as motivation for our interviewees to incorporate Roma women's voices in different spheres of everyday life by establishing or joining an initiative or using their knowledge and capacities in academia and art. There are few organizations in Southeast Europe focusing on and led by Roma women, and even fewer led by girls or young women and regardless of whether they would identify as part of a movement, they are a driving force in the fight for Roma women's empowerment.

## **Recommendations on how to support young Roma feminists**

The conclusion we arrive at from this research is that the distinctiveness of the challenges affecting Roma girls and young women calls for a tailored approach in the efforts to support their activism and grassroots organizing. While this research provides a general overview of the societal challenges that the Roma youth and collectives are facing, individuals and collectives face specific challenges in different social settings that might have been overlooked or not discussed at all with our interviewees. The recommendations below aim to encourage funders and partnering feminist collectives to use their

---

available resources to raise the number of Roma girls and young women involved in activism, and acknowledge the sentiment that every effort matters.

Our learning comes from the voices of Roma feminist organizers from Southeast European context and the following recommendations respond to the organizing conditions and experience lived by the Roma feminist activists in that region.

### **Long-term flexible support is crucial**

Roma women, girls and LGBTQI+ youth face multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion in their daily lives and organizing. The access to resources is very limited and it is difficult for emerging Roma led groups to expand their funding sources. Usually, the funders that recognize Roma organizing as part of their funding priorities still don't provide long term funding and the limited resources can't reach all vulnerable communities. This affects young Roma women and trans youth even more. Committed, flexible funding would support these emerging organizations to do the much needed work and strengthen their capacities to access other funding opportunities. Since the realities of Roma organizers can shift rapidly from the conditions they work in, the communities they can reach, or the difficulty of their daily lives, flexible funding would support them to plan ahead and also respond to the ever-changing context. It would allow organizations to grow, become more visible and impact implementation of anti-racism policies, practices and laws that would protect Roma communities. To improve the lives of Roma communities from access to living conditions, education, employment and environments without discrimination require time, commitment and consistency and this is only possible with sustainable resources and support.

### **Reach your audience**

Online calls for granting opportunities rarely reach girls and young women living in isolated neighborhoods, considering that access to the internet is often very limited or unavailable. Moreover, the vocabulary used in such calls can often be confusing or incomprehensible. When possible, it is best to partner with Roma grassroots collectives and activists who can organize informative sessions for girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth about specific funding opportunities; these kinds of sessions also make it easier to answer questions that these individuals' parents might have, since girls and young women have to be granted permission by their parents/legal guardians before joining or starting with their planned activities.

### **Provide mentoring programs**

Self-organization among Roma girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth is still a developing concept within the Roma movement. Girls are not often being encouraged to act as agents within their settings. Even though they know best what changes must be done within their communities and which actors have to be influenced in making those changes, girls often lack the capacities and knowledge on how to self-organize and persist as a youth-led group. While foundations usually provide assistance with these processes, as mentioned above, such information rarely reaches girls within the communities. To this end, it is recommended that feminist foundations identify the communities in need in regions that they want to support and cooperate with Roma women's organizations in their proximity which would provide accompaniment/fellowship programs to Roma girls and young women. These programs would create a safe space to access capacity strengthening opportunities, learn and exchange with their peers and encourage them to self-organize.

---

### **Consider diverse initiatives**

If a Roma organization with mixed-generational leadership focusing on the empowerment of Roma girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth, applies for a granting opportunity, the foundation can consider their application with the condition of devoting their first grant to train young girls or women under 30 to assume the leadership roles in the organization from the second year, or to form a new collective within that organization or separately. Having in mind that Roma girls and young women at times do not see the need to form a new collective, such a practice would encourage existing organizations to form programs led by and focused on Roma youth challenges. This will allow for intergenerational exchange and participation of young Roma feminists in decision-making and strategy development in the organization.

### **Language skills**

Not many Roma girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth, especially the ones living in communities, are fluent English speakers or writers to produce proposals in English. Foundations should encourage interested parties to submit their applications in their local languages and assign a translator to the collective to assist them in their mutual communication. This would allow for more collectives to access funding and build a relationship with donors based on trust, mutuality and reciprocity.

### **Share your networks**

Roma women's collectives are often approached by Roma girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth in need of specific assistance. In cases when the collective cannot offer financial support and the issue is beyond the staff's expertise, a network consisting of activists and feminist collectives can prove to be useful. Activists can share information, recommendations, offer legal advice and protection, as well as use each other's connections in cases of emergencies. Foundations can distribute a list of their current and past grantee partners with a description of their interests and expertise and distribute it among Roma collectives operating in their proximity and are not eligible for receiving a grant. Moreover, as a result of their activism, it is not uncommon for Roma feminists to deal with different kinds of abuse by the affected parties. The organizations in their proximity can offer their support and provide their expertise in dealing with threatening situations.

### **Seeing past demographics: Men and older women in leadership positions**

Many collectives founded and led by young Roma women choose to involve men and women of older generations within their structure. This might make them ineligible for certain funding opportunities. Before dismissing their applications, foundations can conduct an interview with the collective and learn more about the power dynamics within the group. Roma girls and young women might choose to self-organize through an existing well-established organization operating within their proximity, or they might choose to involve men and women of different generations for safety reasons, consideration of the sensitivity of the issues they are tackling, or the practical reasons of needing assistance, support, or even just numbers in fulfilling the requirements for registering an NGO.

However, it is important to be in conversation with the group to understand how decisions are being made and the roles that Roma youth hold in the organization. The role of youth in social justice movements is often tokenized and reduced to representation without true decision-making power. This often leads to disengagement of young people in organizing and knowledge exchange and it directly affects the sustainability of the social justice movement. We don't want to perpetuate this treatment of

---

young activists so we engage in the deep listening of their needs and provide grantmaking and accompaniment support that reflects their reality.

### **Broadening access to online capacity development programs**

In cases where, according to current funding policy or legal requirements, a donor is not able to provide a grant to a young feminist-led Roma group, there are other ways to support. The donor can consider including such groups in their capacity strengthening programs and accompaniment opportunities, recommend them or connect them to other funders and support them to expand their networks and connect them with other organizations in their context.

### **Incorporate Roma voices on the feminist scene**

One of the ways to support the visibility and participation of Roma feminist activists is to provide movement strengthening support that allows Roma activists to exchange their experiences and knowledge with non-Roma organizations and make their stories and lived experiences heard across movements. Such partnerships will also be useful in providing a network of Roma girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth who can participate in the spaces organized by the funders' grantee partners and when possible, include Roma girls, young women and LGBTQI+ youth in their structure.

### **Let them decide**

Roma women's collectives should not be looked at from the prism of mainstream feminist collectives. Roma girls and young women might choose to focus on activities that at first glance do not seem to have a feminist background. It is important to understand that they draw from their daily experiences and prioritize according to their specific needs and respond to the challenge that they face.

### **Every success matters**

Funders should give space to their grantee partners to evaluate their activities and measure their own success. Moreover, both parties should be reminded that every Roma youth led feminist initiative is a success on its own and change cannot be achieved overnight. It is of utmost importance for funders to provide emotional support and praise to every effort made by the Roma feminist youth since working in hostile environments can be highly discouraging.

## **How FRIDA has supported Roma feminist organizing and steps forward**

### **Resourcing Roma feminist organizing**

FRIDA has a participatory grantmaking model that not only involves young feminist organizers in deciding who receives funding but also informs FRIDA's grantmaking strategy, outreach process and the changes we make to our grantmaking model. FRIDA is committed to making its systems more accessible by restructuring its "call for proposals" application process. What we have learned from Roma feminist activists is that there are various obstacles for them to complete FRIDA's grantmaking process. So far

---

we have addressed many of these challenges and modified our systems, but from this interview process we have learned more about where we still need to go deeper in our work.

## **1. Application Process**

### **Language**

FRIDA accepts online applications in 7 languages. However, the Roma young feminist groups might only speak Romani or other local languages. In order to apply for funding, they would need to receive support to complete the form in one of these languages and then participate in FRIDA's peer decision making process. Securing a space where people who live similar realities can be in conversation with one another, build trust and solidarity takes time and it should be prioritized and approached with care.

### **Internet Access**

FRIDA's online platform is available on mobile phones as well as on computers but we recognize that even this way might be challenging for some groups to apply.

#### **FRIDA is committed to:**

- \*Partner with local organizations to support Roma-led groups to apply
- \*Provide assistance throughout the application process
- \*Support groups with translation for participating in conferences, networking and capacity strengthening opportunities

## **2. Outreach**

Since there is already a lack of access, we conducted a more intentional outreach process. Together with advisors and local partnering organizations we ensure that young Roma women and trans youth can learn about FRIDA and apply for the funding. We ensure that this information is provided in their local language through advisors, partners, or FRIDA staff members. We explain each stage of the process and how participatory grantmaking works. We need to be available on different social media platforms to share this information and respond to any clarifying questions.

We have learned that young Roma women and trans youth do not necessarily organize independently but more in an intergenerational way. Reasons for this are many, from living conditions to various types of inaccessibility and therefore there is a need for support from within their community and organizations that they trust and seek to be a part of. For this reason, FRIDA supports youth programs within established Roma women's and LGBTQI+ organizations. The long term impact of this encouragement for young Roma activists is the ability to access capacity strengthening to organize independently later or take over leadership positions in their organizations.

#### **FRIDA is committed to:**

- \*Implement focused outreach process in local languages with local Roma communities
- \*Support Roma young feminist leadership with accompaniment and capacity strengthening
- \*Support Roma young feminist programs within larger organizations

## **3. Reporting, Legal and Administrative Barriers**

Due to security reasons, long bureaucratic processes, or lack of access, many young Roma feminist activists choose not to register legally as an organization, but rather decide to self-organize as an informal group. Not having the conditions of a rigid admin structure doesn't allow groups to receive financial support, so FRIDA supports groups to find fiscal sponsors and cover the percentage the



---

organizations require to manage their grant. We also offer capacity and accompaniment support for this process so that they can independently manage their funds and we try to make this in their own language. At the same time, FRIDA's support is core, flexible funding and, considering the ever-changing conditions, the groups can use the funding in the most appropriate way possible.

Understanding the issue of internet access and language and allowing groups to report in their language and in the most accessible format to them is important. The evaluation reports should have space for the collectives to share their realities and allow for their internal and external reflection which supports them in their future work. The grants the groups receive should give the flexibility they need to meaningfully support their communities. We ensure that the reporting serves the group to map out opportunities and capacity strengthening needs. We understand that change does not happen with one grant, no matter how impactful it is, so FRIDA commits to renewing groups for 3 to 5 years. This enables the group to plan long term strategies with the assurance of continuous support that doesn't perpetuate precarious positioning of the groups on the margins.

**FRIDA is committed to:**

- \*Support unregistered collectives and groups that receive funding through fiscal sponsors
- \*Provide long term, flexible core financial support
- \*Provide capacity strengthening and accompaniment support, as well holistic care support
- \*Minimal legal requirements and support groups to understand those requirements ( for example contracts or appropriate reporting.)
- \*Reporting focused on learning how to provide intentional support in their preferred language
- \*Support cross-movement connections

**Support Roma Young Feminist Leadership and Voices**

There are many non-Roma led organizations that work on Roma related issues. They receive support to do work in these communities without having staff, advisory or board members coming from that community. This moves away from an accountable solidarity and allyship and rather replication of practices within our organizations that don't allow experts from Roma communities to be in the leading positions. This current lack of representation has resulted in little or no understanding of the Roma community's needs and limited building access for them to self-organize. Subsequently, Roma organizations remain disadvantaged and under-resourced while well-established organizations receive funding with ease to work in Roma communities without having any Roma community members in positions of influence. Representation of Roma activists throughout social justice organizations is critical in order for their work to truly be intersectional and anti-racist and to serve these communities.

**FRIDA is committed to:**

- \*Ensure Roma grantee partner voices are represented in advocacy spaces
- \*Support Roma young feminist leadership within FRIDA staff, advisory and other consultancy and governance positions
- \*Work closely with Roma feminist activists to incorporate their needs and visions at all levels of FRIDA's organizational structure
- \*Ensure that the funding is directed to self-led Roma organizations and those with strong leadership of Roma activists especially when working on Roma related issues

---

**Contributors:**

**Project Coordinator & Editor:** Jovana Djordjevic

**Researcher & Writer:** Suzane Usein

**Editor:** Megan Fortuné

**Designer:** Anna Rabko

**Activists interviewed:**

Sarita Jasharova - [NGO 'LiI' for the protection of the rights of women and children](#)

Marija Mitrovich - Association of Young Roma in Serbia

Danica Jovanovich - [Association of Roma Novi Becej](#)

Silvija Nešić

Nadica Balog - [Association of Roma women 'Romsko Srce'](#)

Dragana Đurđević - [Association of Roma women 'Romsko Srce'](#)

Begzada Jovanović - [Association for Development and Education of Youth 'Safe Step'](#)

Jadranka Miličević - [CARE International. Balkans](#)

Indira Bajramović - [Roma Women's Association "Bolja Buducnost"](#)

Fatima Naza - [Center for Roma Initiatives](#)

Manjola Veizi - [Roma Women Rights Center](#)

Irena Majko

Teodora Krumova - [Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance "Amalipe"](#)

Mihaela Dragan - ['Giuvlipen' The Roma Women's Theatre Company](#)

Carmen Gheorghe - [E-Romnja](#)

Mimoza Gavrani

Sabiha Suleiman - [Roma Women's Association of Drosero 'Elpida'](#)

Arhanghella

Bianca Varga ∞

*Supported [in part] by a grant from the Foundation Open Society Institute in cooperation with the Roma Initiatives of the Open Society Foundations*