

# ROMA PERCEPTIONS ON GENDER

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS ON GENDER, ITS  
INFLUENCE ON HIV VULNERABILITIES AND  
POSSIBLE RESPONSES



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# FOREWORD

*Roma populations have its rich cultural heritage. Many Roma have contributed to arts, culture, business, law and other sectors of the society. It was important to identify the factors that enabled its members to succeed as well as barriers to achievements. One of the factors repeatedly articulated was gender.*

*Gender issues in Roma population are one of the critical factors influencing overall Roma community development and their HIV vulnerability reduction. FPH, together with NSHC initiated a partnership with the Roma communities to facilitate the exploration of gender dimension in Roma lives. The aim was to support the communities to reflect among themselves what were the factors in their gender relations which might contribute to their resilience as well as vulnerabilities to HIV, individual advancement, and community development.*

*FPH and NSHC have gained significant insight into the needs of Roma populations in Vojvodina. We are grateful to our Roma partners for their willingness to share their thoughts and insights about their lives from a gender perspective.*

*The rich insights provided by our Roma colleagues were compiled in this report as a joint product of the FPH and NSHC collaboration with our Roma friends. It is hoped that this information will facilitate future support to the Roma communities in their continued efforts to reach self-actualization and gender transformation.*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

FPH	Fondation PH Suisse - Partnerships in Health
NSHC	Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
AIDS	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
MOP	Material assistance to families
STIs	Sexually transmitted infections
KUD	Association for culture and art

# I. BACKGROUND

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The “Gender Construct in Roma Population” project was a collaborative initiative between Fondation Partnerships in Health (FPH) and Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre (NSHC) as part of the Western Balkans Programme to Fight HIV and AIDS. The Programme was funded by the Swedish International Cooperation Agency (Sida) and this community participatory research has been implemented from 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009.

The **goal** of this project was to support community conversations in order to raise awareness and identify potential areas for action to reduce HIV vulnerability by stimulating the possibility of specific gender transformation among Roma population in Vojvodina.

The **strategy** was through improved awareness of gender relations in Roma communities to stimulate their recognition of obstacles and for potential actions to reduce gender related vulnerabilities. FPH and NSHC jointly developed a community conversation approach to engage Roma in five settlements. The project explored ways in which the social environment defines and influences the rights, responsibilities and identities of men and women in their interrelations, expectations and assigned roles. It also explores the potential gender construct in the Roma culture from these settlements that might contribute to both females and males HIV vulnerabilities. Understanding the gender construct of a community is a pre-condition for its transformation to reduce HIV vulnerabilities of members of a community.

Participatory approach was used in this study so that the Roma from the study settlements are the centre of a series of active community conversations. These series of community conversations facilitated the Roma women and men to determine what are at stake and what decisions they might entertain. Such approach provides the research participants an opportunity to move from passive role as givers of information to become actively involved in current research and potential future activities derived from the knowledge gained in this research. It creates the sense of ownership over research results and provides motivations for potential actions to change.

# I. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

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Research participants were Roma women and men from Novi Sad, Beocin, and Backi Monostor. In addition to gathering the self-perceived notion of gender among the Roma in these communities, standard questionnaires were administered to key stakeholders who interact with these Roma communities to obtain perceptions from non-Roma. These stakeholders include representatives of educational, health, and social welfare institutions; representatives of local self-governances; and staff from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dealing with Roma issues. In addition, to enrich and illustrate the findings from the community perceptions, case studies of Roma from these communities were collected through key-informant interviews.

There were 197 Roma participating in focus groups, 101 women and 96 men. Questionnaires were completed by 38 representatives of schools, social welfare centers, health centers, NGOs and local self-governance structures (27 women and 11 men; 15 from social welfare centers, 4 from health centers, 9 from schools, 3 from NGOs, and 7 from self-governance structures). In-depth interviews were conducted with 6 Roma women and 4 Roma men.

## III. RESEARCH LOCATION AND ROMA COMMUNITIES

The research was implemented in 3 locations in Vojvodina: Novi Sad, Beočin, Bački Monoštor (Sombor municipality), Serbia.

### NOVI SAD

The city of Novi Sad has 299.294 inhabitants. According to the last Census<sup>1</sup>, there are 1,770 Roma in Novi Sad, but the estimates made by Roma NGOs are significantly higher with the claim that there are actually 10,000 Roma in Novi Sad. About two thirds of Roma live in several Roma settlements located in the suburbs: Veliki rit, Adice, Sangaj, Banglades and Slana bara.

Research participants were Roma women and men living in Veliki rit and Slana bara settlements. Most of them are unemployed. They make a living by collecting discarded materials (mainly among those Roma displaced from Kosovo) or trade (selling fruits, vegetables or second-hand clothes, etc.). Some work on a black market as carpenters, construction workers, auto mechanics, etc. A number of them earn a living through entertainment, playing traditional music, while the most vulnerable ones are beggars. A significant number of Roma in these two settlements receive social welfare benefits, such as material assistance to families (MOP)<sup>2</sup>.

Novi Sad Roma is of Orthodox, Catholic, and Islamic religion. They have varied customs, tradition, and languages. For example, Orthodox Roma speaks Serbian or Roma languages. Catholics Roma speaks Serbian, Hungarian and Romanian; while most Muslim Roma speak Albanian language. Consequently, language barrier is a real problem. Research participants in the two settlements in Novi

<sup>1</sup> 2002 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings", Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, February 2003  
<sup>2</sup> Material provisioning (social welfare) is a kind of support that can be provided to an individual, or family, without income or with low income below the level of social security, if fulfilling additional conditions related to possessing and usage of properties, possibility of supporting by relatives or using the right to work. It is a monthly financial aid.



Sad were mainly of Orthodox and Islamic religion.

### BAČKI MONOŠTOR

Backi Monostor is a village 15km away from Sombor, with 3,920 inhabitants. There are 600 Roma living in Backi Monostor, making up about 15% of the entire village population. Most of them live in a Roma settlement outside of the village, while the rest live in the village proper.

Due to lack of education most of these Roma in Backi Monostor are unemployed and live in extreme poverty. These Roma speak Roma language with a specific dialect that sounds like Romanian. During previous migrations these Roma inhabited the very banks of the Danube. Living near the river and forests, they became well-known carpenters. They also make a living as fishermen, hunters, and as entertainers.

Collaboration with the majority population is harmonious. They work with each other. They socialize and visit each other. However marriages between Roma and non-Roma are very rare.

Roma from Backi Monostor are of Roman Catholic religion, although their close relatives from Slavonia and Baranja regions are Orthodox. Change of religion happened during old days, when parents used to baptize their newborns in the first church they saw. Today, as they are not migrating any more, they remain very loyal believers and follow the rules and regulations of the church.

### BEOČIN

Beočin is a city located 20km from Novi Sad. According to the last Census<sup>3</sup>, Beočin municipality has 16,086 inhabitants, while the city itself has around 7,000 inhabitants. The total number of Roma in Beočin municipality is around 1,200 (1,100 in the city proper). These Roma live in "Šljivik" and "Kolonija" settlements.

Most of Beočin Roma used to be employed in the Beočin cement factory. After the privatization process most of them lost their jobs. Today they make a living by collecting waste materials, trade, or earning as construction workers. A large number of Roma families receive social benefits, so-called MOP (material assistance to families).

Roma living in Beočin moved there from Kosovo in 1948 because of the opportunity for employment at the Beočin cement factory. They are Muslims and they speak Roma language with *arlia* dialect spoken mostly in the south of Serbia.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

Three different data collection methods have been used for the purpose of this research - focus group discussions and standard self-administered questionnaires. In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with prominent Roma women and men (community leaders) to illustrate personal experiences in overcoming the gender-related obstacles.

To ensure each group felt comfortable and has the space to voice their opinions, in the first phase of the project, focus groups were first conducted separately for each age group and by sex. That is to say, the focus groups were first conducted only among young girls; young boys only group, among elderly men or women; or among adult women and men each separately.

The first Phase included 19 focus groups with a total of 197 participants (101 or 51% were women and 96 or 49% were men). The focus group participants were divided into three age grouping:

- 1) Less than 20 years old (the youth group)
- 2) Those aged 20 to 40 (the adult group), and
- 3) Those over 40 years of age (the elders group).

In the second phase of the project from November 2008 to March 2009 cross-sex group conversations were conducted. The second phase was implemented to ensure cross-group validation and interactions specifically on gender perceptions to enrich the discussion, particularly on matters of future directions. Mixed sex focus groups were then conducted among the same age groups. For example, a focus group consisting of both boys and girls or a focus group consisted of both elder men and elder women were conducted after sex-specific group discussions were completed.

The second phase of the research involved additional 10 mixed-sex group conversations with 4 youth, 3 adult and 3 elders groups. In this second phase a total of 113 Roma (51 males and 62 or 55% females) participated in the conversations. During the conversations they said that they preferred discussing in smaller groups separating by sex, because they felt freer to express their opinions. They also felt that in a single-sex conversation group it was easier to communicate because there was no fear of shame in front of members of the opposite sex.

## FOCUS GROUP

Qualitative discussions by the groups were recorded. The key issues discussed during the 19 focus groups were as follows:

- ***What are the roles and responsibilities of Roma women and men, at the household in a family and in the community?***
- ***Who obtain and controls household resources?***
- ***What do the women and men think about reproductive health and risks of HIV infections?***
- ***How do Roma women and men participate in their own community activities?***
- ***What is the attitude of men or women on gender issues including gender equality?***
- ***What are the short-term vs. long-term needs and interests of women and men?***
- ***What are main obstacles they encounter in life and what are their strategies to overcome these obstacles?***

Different participatory techniques have been employed including group discussions, day-line technique, analysis of field action, "brainstorming", etc. Day-line technique is a participative research technique which is used to gain information about a schedule and duration of activities or events in a certain period of time (a day). Analysis of field action is a technique used by focus group participants to analyze the present situation as it is, and to project a desired future situation. During a focus group, after participants name the statements about present condition and identify wanted future state, they identify obstacles and possibilities for transition from one to another state that is transition from present to future state. Focus groups have been implemented with Roma assistants because some participants did not know Serbian language.

## QUESTIONNAIRE

A standardized questionnaire was used to collect data on attitudes and opinions of service providers regarding gender roles in Roma community, its influence on social welfare, health behaviour, education, etc. These service providers are representatives from social welfare centers, health institutions, schools, NGOs, and local self-governance entities. Questionnaires were sent to 50 addresses of different organizations and institutions. According to the research plan, 30 organiza-

tions and institutions should have completed the questionnaire. We have received 38 questionnaires filled in by representatives of organizations and institutions that provide services for Roma people, or whose beneficiaries are Roma people. All completed questionnaires were analyzed.

## KEY-INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Influential Roma community women and men have been identified and interviewed to get in-depth information on their experiences in overcoming gender- and tradition-related obstacles in their personal growth. These interviews were used as case studies in this research report.

# V. RESEARCH RESULTS

## A. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION FINDINGS

### 1. ON GENDER AND DIVISION OF LABOR

There is a clear gender division of roles and responsibilities among the Roma. A Roma man is considered to be the head of the household. His responsibility is to earn money and provide for his family. He is responsible for undertaking physically demanding jobs, such as wood chopping, construction work, collecting discarded materials, clearing the field, etc. A Roman women's role is to be a housewife and a mother, to obey her husband, to give birth to children, and to take care of their husbands and children. She is responsible for household chores such as getting groceries, cooking, doing laundry, cleaning the house, taking care of children, etc. However, she is also responsible for undertaking what are normally considered to be a man's job in case her husband does not do those works.

*"Woman **sits** at home and man goes out to **work**."*

*---A female from the Novi Sad adult group*

*"A man must take care that the firewood is provided and, to take care of money... A woman has to take care of children, the household work, iron clothes, and keep her man tidy..."*

*--- A female from the Novi Sad adult group*

There were different opinions on whether men or women's role is more difficult. Generally, woman's work is less valued than that of a man because a man is the one to earn money and provide for a family. At the same time participants in both male and female focus groups consider woman's work as difficult and painstaking.

*"It's always harder for women. Man has one job and women has hundreds to bake, to cook, to keep an eye on the children, to take them to the doctor's, to take them to school, to give births..."*

*---A female from Beocin adult group*

*"It is (more difficult) for woman because she has to take care of everything, of house, of children, and I just work and come home."*

**--- A male from Novi Sad adult group**

*"God forbid for me to be a woman!"*

**--- A male from Novi Sad adult group**

Roma women pointed out that men have greater rights than women because they are physically stronger. Therefore women have to respect and obey them in everything. Roma men also think that, traditionally, a woman must obey a man. It is the man who has a right to beat a woman, but they also mentioned several times that today there is a law which prohibits such wife beating behaviour. They concluded that, therefore, today men and women are almost equal.

*"If you don't respect your husband, you don't respect God."*

**---A female from Beocin elders group**

*"We have to forgive them, men; if he is having another woman his wife keeps quiet. If he's drinking – his wife should keep quiet. If we talk, we get beaten."*

**--- A female from Novi Sad adult group**

*"I got beaten every day, and afterwards I had to go to work in a vineyard and he took all the money I earned. I have nothing good from him; I put my kids through school all by myself."*

**---A female from Beocin elders group**

*"Man is the head of the house. Men do not know how to cook, but on the other hand, I never had to worry about nothing. I relied on him in everything, he was a man... People can say what they wish, but that is the truth, I wish that I was dead instead of him, because I only suffer like this (alone)... I have no husband, no Firewood, no nothing..."*

**--- A female from Backi Monostor elders group**

When asked whether it is better to be a woman or a man, participants of both sexes and all ages agreed that it is better to be a man. They would also prefer having a boy. To have a boy means certain prestige in a Roma community. Boys inherit the family name and family properties. They remain in the house, while girls get married and go away, in somebody else's house. Although daughters are more devoted to their parents, although they help the parents at home, and generally make less problems than sons, it is more appreciated when a woman gives birth to a boy. It is also considered that women suffer more so it is better when a boy is born.

*"When it's a girl it is not good because she is always other people's servant, she gets married fast and makes problems..."*

**--- A female from Backi Monostor youth group**

*"We prefer when a boy is born. I don't know. It is something from our tradition, from old times... That is how we all grew up, something you can't forget, and it's transferred from generation to generation."*

**--- A male from Beocin, elders group**

*"Family appreciates more when a boy is born, especially husbands, because that way their blood is preserved. But it is more lucrative to have a girl because parents get money from her when she gets married."*

**--- A female from Novi Sad elders group**

## 2. ON OBTAINING AND CONTROLLING HOUSEHOLD RESOURCES

Roma make a living out of part-time, seasonal jobs, construction work, collecting waste materials, etc. Part of the income comes from state's financial assistance for each second, third and fourth child, and other kinds of social welfare benefits. Due to lack of education and many household obligations, Roma women in most cases do not earn an income. However, it is the man who makes decision on whether his wife can go out and get employed. In rare cases the couple makes this decision jointly. Roma women mentioned that jealousy is the most common reason for which a man forbids his wife to work outside. Men consider that women should stay at home, take care of children and the household. Although some of the male participants have felt that it was better when both spouses work because the income would then be more.

A man is expected to earn money, to bring the income home and support his family. But, it is the woman who has to get everything her family needs with the money she gets from her husband. It

is her responsibility to manage the money and find ways to buy all that is needed.

*"A man provides for his family, while a woman only spends...  
she plans how, where, what..."*

**--- A male from Beocin adult group**

*"A woman has to find her way out with the money and to see how much  
she should spend. She has to bring the rest of the money back. When she does,  
that is a good woman, because she has to make two dinars<sup>1</sup> out of one."*

**--- A male from Novi Sad elders group**

<sup>1</sup> Dinar is local Serbian currency

*"A man provides for his family, while a woman only spends...  
she plans how, where, what..."*

**--- A male from Beocin adult group**

*"I used to say to her – here is some money, and you find solution for the rest.  
I don't know what she used to do, whether she took loans or she went to work  
and earn some more..."*

**---- A male from Novi Sad elders group**

*"If my wife would get employment, people would say she is not going to work  
each day, but that she is going to some other man."*

**----- A male from Beocin adult group**

Roma make decisions related to whether they will enroll their children in school and support them while they are in school, based on material circumstances. It is more likely they will provide money for education for their male children. Education in general is not valued much in the Roma community. It is common for Roma children to quit school in order to get married.

*"My first 17-year-old son brings a bride home. Next year my other son brings a bride,  
so how can I put them through school? Should I put my daughters-in-law through  
school also?"*

**----A female from Beocin adult group**

In Roma community a man is the exclusive owner of the property. In case of divorce or death of a husband, his wife does not inherit anything. This is because Roma do not officially record their marriages at the registration office.

### 3. ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Traditionally Roma parents are the ones who make a decision on their children's marriages, although this arranged marriages are rarer nowadays. Sometimes this decision is taken right after a child is born. Roma Muslims (from Kosovo) live under strong influence of tradition – in most cases parents decide on whom their son or daughter is going to marry. In case they are marrying their son, they also pay certain amount of money to the bride's family. If the couple splits, than the bride's family has to give double amount of money back. A bride would be returned back to her family if it turns out that she was not a virgin. Roma Christians have a more liberal attitude towards their children's marriages. Although parents are trying to influence their children's' decisions, it is common today for the young to choose their partners by themselves. However, virginity is still very important.

Young Roma get married very young – girls at the age of 15 or 16, and boys at the age of 17 or 18. An unmarried girl older than 20 is considered to be an old maid and she will have difficulties getting married later. In this matter, little has changed in Roma tradition in the last several decades. That is the way for adults to control the sexuality of their young, especially young girls' sexuality. A marriage is made when a wedding party is organized and those marriages are not officially registered at the registrar's office. This is due to tradition, and due to the fact that minors are getting married.

*"I married my daughter at the age of 14... It is a difficult custom of ours.  
If she is going to disgrace me, than it is better that I disgrace her first.  
That's how the custom is. It's better for me to give her away in proper time  
than to let her escape with somebody."*

**----- A female from Novi Sad adult group**

*"The earlier, the better."*

**---- A male from Beocin adult group**

*"No, not on the paper... you love me, I love you... and that's it."*

**----- A male from Backi Monostor youth group**

In the event when parents object to their daughters' marriage, they often elope and get married anyway.

*"When you love him, you don't listen to anybody."*

----- **A female from Beocin youth group**

Girl's chastity is highly valued in Roma community. The same rule does not apply to young men. On the contrary – it is common for young men to have sexual relations before marriage. Parents marry their daughters early in order to "preserve their chastity" and to prevent their daughters disgrace them. If it is discovered that the newly wed girl is not a virgin, she is brought back to her family. Such a girl can remarry again, but not as a "girl", rather, as a "woman", to someone much older. Young men rather choose girls to marry.

It used to be a custom for elderly women to check the sheets of the newly wed couple, in order to see whether the bride was a virgin. If that was the case, then some money would be put on the bed and the sheet would be presented in front of the wedding tent. If the bride was not a virgin, the wedding would be called off and the bride given back to her family immediately. It was a great shame.

*"They say that a girl carries her shame on her forehead, and the boy carries it on his heel. He steps on it. Everyone would say for a woman – wow, look at this one, she did that and that... and for a man – well, girls would love him even more."*

----- **A female from Beocin elders group**

Married Roma men often have liaison with other women, and that is not condemned by the community because a man "has a right" to do so. Women complain about that, but they state that they cannot change anything and that they have to accept this fact in the end of a day. Divorce is frequent in a Roma community. Most often it is domestic violence that triggers a divorce. Community often blames a woman for the divorce because she is expected to accept her husband's behaviour and to withstand it. Female participants said that it was very often the case for a woman to endure domestic violence and stay marriage for her children's sake as well as because of her economic dependence.

*"If a divorce happens, if a woman goes back to her parents, than everyone persuades her to go back to her husband. She is guilty because her husband was maybe a little nervous, a little drunk, and she should know better to keep herself out of his sight until he feels better."*

---- **A female from Novi Sad adult group**

Children born in a marriage belong to their father, and in the case of a divorce, they stay with his family.

*"Parents can only take their daughter back, not the grandchildren.*

*They have their father's blood. I mean, she is the mother of that child, my grandchild. It is painful for me, but it's his blood."*

----- **A female from Novi Sad adult group**

Tradition has a great influence in Roma communities. At the same time, women have a strong desire for more freedom. Roma women are, on the one hand, afraid of possible changes of traditional relations in Roma family thus losing their financial support. On the other hand, there is a distinct desire for more freedom and more rights.

#### 4. ON REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

When it comes to reproductive health issues, there is a general ignorance, passivity, prejudices, fear and shame in a Roma community. Focus group participants said that youth have sexual relations first at the age of 14 or 15, when they get married. Boys have sex before their marriage if they have a chance to do so. In most instances Roma couples do not consider family planning. It is a general impression that they even do not think too much about family planning. It is considered good and desirable to have many children. When asked whether they use contraception, men leave the decision of giving birth to women.

*"No, we do as God said."*

----- **A male from Novi Sad adult group**

*"They just fall out, like from a machine... (babies)"*

---- **A female from Novi Sad adult group**

Roma women said that in most cases they do not use any kind of contraception whatsoever or any protection from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). They have heard of condoms, coils and pills. Men do not think of these issues but leave it to women to think about contraception. The most frequent means of birth control in a Roma community is abortion. Abortion is considered an acceptable birth control method and it is discussed openly. Elderly Roma women said that in the old days, there were not as much abortions as it is the case today. They used to give birth to much more children. Today it is not unheard of for a Roma woman to have a couple of dozens of abortions during her reproductive age. There did not seem to be any differences in such an attitude towards

abortion among members of different religions.

At the same time, there is a negative attitude present in Roma community towards condoms and other means of contraception. Generally there are numerous prejudices and ignorance related to contraceptives. These are considered unnatural and harmful. Elderly Roma women believe that washing with a disinfectant is sufficient protection. There was a great deal of interest among adult women about contraceptives.

*"I do not use that, not a chance. Some women have coils, I could too, but to be honest, I'm afraid."*

----- **One woman from Novi Sad adult group**

*"I have one abortion each year."*

----- **Another women from Novi Sad adult group**

*"Women gain weight from a coil..."*

----- **A third women from Novi Sad adult group**

Most participants have heard of AIDS, gonorrhea, syphilis, crabs or "vaginal discharge". Both Roma men and women do not consider STIs as a real threat to their health. They have heard that a condom protects them from STIs but they rarely use it. Women are not the ones to decide whether or not a condom is going to be used during sexual intercourse. Women do not perceive a potential threat if their husband gets infected. They said that, if that was the case, they would tell him to go to the doctor and get treated. When asked whether they have heard of STIs,

*"Yes, it's uterus and the rest, AIDS..."*

----- **A male from Novi Sad adult group**

Young girls do not go to gynecologists because they are afraid and ashamed. Fear is present among elderly Roma women, too.

*"I went there yesterday. I went in and out three times (without seeing the doctor), because I was afraid."*

----- **A women from Novi Sad adult group**

It is also believed that, if a woman goes to see a gynecologist, she must be pregnant, and her case is discussed in the entire Roma community. Participants said that Roma women only go to a gynecologist to have an abortion. However, it is normal today that Roma children are born in hospitals, so women are more or less in contact with a reproductive health service.

colologist to have an abortion. However, it is normal today that Roma children are born in hospitals, so women are more or less in contact with a reproductive health service.

Young Roma men said that they do use condoms to protect themselves from STIs when they have sex with a girl for the first time or with somebody they do not know. All of them have heard of AIDS, gonorrhea, and syphilis. The elderly men have heard of condoms as a protection from STIs and they know that their young people use condoms. They have only heard of AIDS and they considered it to be very dangerous. Muslim focus group participants believe that proper hygiene is sufficient protection from all STIs and they added that there are no STIs among them.

##### **5. ON PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES**

Roma community is closed within its own boundaries, isolated from the rest of society and at the margin of other social life. Roma population is one of the most socially vulnerable and as such, it has very little power and influence. They are not socially engaged, particularly not outside of their own ethnic group, and few if any is politically engaged.

In general, the notion of social engagement was rather unclear to focus groups participants. The culmination of social life in Roma community is a wedding party or celebration of International Women's Day.

Roma youth spend their time mostly at home with their peers. They rarely go out, especially the girls. They are not active within local Roma associations except for some individuals. Unmarried girls spend time doing house work with their girl friends and watching TV soap operas.

Married women with families have the least free time due to numerous obligations in their households. They spend their free time with their neighbors having coffee, talking, or watching TV. They do not go out and their participation in the life of a community is minimal.

Men mostly go out without women. The elderly Roma men spend time in the Novi Sad Humanitarian Centre's social clubs for the elderly, which was established by a Roma humanitarian assistance project.

##### **6. ON GENDER ROLES AND GENDER EQUALITY**

The concept of gender and gender roles, as well as differences between "gender" and "sex", were completely unknown to focus group participants. The facilitators explained each of the terms and shared with examples from their daily life.

All female focus group participants agreed that gender inequality is very much present in Roma communities. Lack of education of Roma women and the tradition that a man is the head of a household are the two main reasons for existing gender roles and great inequality between Roma women and men.

*"A husband is the one who decides on everything. If there is a father-in-law, than it is him who decides. Neither husband nor woman and children are to question that..."*

**---- A women from Novi Sad adult group**

Inequality is often connected with unequal division of labour. One woman stated that men and women have the same rights but different obligations due to tradition and lack of education. The others said that men had more rights and that they are in a position to give orders.

Men do not approve of violence against women yet still they think that women should not be given more freedom because it would lead to promiscuity or making their own decisions, etc. This is something women agreed with. They also think that the current legislation influenced significantly in decreasing domestic violence against women. Speaking about violence, all participants primarily think of physical violence. An elderly Roma man in Novi Sad described as "violence" by women against men when a woman demands from men to buy them something. The elderly group from Novi Sad felt that much has already been done in the area of gender equality compared with olden days and that Roma women and men are practically equal today.

*"I think that those who are physically stronger have more rights than those who are not so strong."*

**--- A woman from Backi Monostor adult group**

*"It is normal that a man beats a woman."*

**--- A woman from Novi Sad adult group**

Women have fewer rights because women feel inferior in relation to men. They are financially dependent on men and they see this dependency as the cause of inequality in Roma communities. As one of the solutions, they suggested that measures should be taken to increase women's employment therefore enhance their self-reliance and independence. Participants from all focus groups tend to expect solutions to come from the Government. They believed that better financial situation would solve all their problems. At the same time they failed to consider what they could do themselves to improve their present situation.

Based on the series of community conversations through focus group discussions, the present views of gender relations in Roma communities are summarized as follows:

- **Male-dominant.**
- **A men has more rights than a woman**
- **A man is the one to decide how a household work, resources and other materials will be distributed.**
- **Physical violence against girls and women is present and accepted.**
- **Women have no right to make decisions.**
- **Men are very jealous.**
- **Women are not allowed to speak about their problems and women are not protected by law.**

The type of future gender relations among Roma envisioned by the participants are described as follows:

- **There would be agreements between women and men regarding their obligations,**
- **Joint decision making by men and women**
- **Respecting but not fearing the elder members of family**
- **Division of labour between men and women are made fairly**
- **Men and women should spend their free time together**
- **Women should be employed,**
- **More children should get education, and**
- **The laws on preventing domestic violence should be enforced.**

The obstacles recognized by participants are as follows:

- **Poor economic status of women**
- **Women's financial dependency on men**
- **The influence of tradition and customs,**
- **Lack of education, and**
- **Fear.**

Both men and women agreed on the following for their opportunities and potentials:

- **They expect the government to adopt laws on gender equality;**
- **They hope for better education and upbringing which would make the Roma community different from that of the traditional Roma status.**

The difference in defining the obstacles for changes between men and women were:

- **A lack of understanding between men and women, and**
- **A lack of enthusiasm for changes among men.**

The group of elderly men from Novi Sad emphasized the progress related to gender issues over the past several years. They said that it was positive to think about gender equality. However, it seems that they have idealized the present situation. Increased tolerance towards ethnic communities who are more educated and living alongside them made it possible for Roma community to make certain progress. It is a general impression among them that traditions significantly influence the level of gender equality in Roma communities. Together with that, cultural differences and low level of education further perpetuate women's financial dependence thus enhanced inequality.

The youth group were the most reluctant to open the discussion, which is again related to tradition and upbringing. Except feeling unpleasant, they also expressed apprehension due to lack of experience and consciousness about their own position and obligations that lay ahead of them. At that age they are still dependent on their parents and from that perspective it is difficult for them to see their own position in relation to the opposite sex. They do not see the present situation realistically, they have little experience, and they feel unpleasant to discuss certain issues, so most probably they hide or they misinterpret some issues related to their lives. Also, it seems that they have not been thinking about their roles (and especially about the factors determining the roles), but they accept their roles as something logical, unchangeable, accepting as their own opinion all the prejudices. On the other hand, adult men and women were very open to discuss all issues. The level of relaxed attitude and collaboration for these community conversations improve with the age of the participants.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS FOR HIV VULNERABILITIES

The **elders** talked about their own experiences related to sexually transmitted infections, promiscuity, relations between men and women now and in their youth. It was noted that, however, the elders in the communities were well-informed about HIV. They emphasized how important it is for a good relationship between spouses at their age and that at their age there is more respect between partners.

The **adults** were very interested in the issue of sexuality, HIV and STIs. They expressed their opinion very openly. The adult group, when compared to the youth and elders groups, appeared to be the most informed, tolerant and open for cooperation.

The **youth** from Novi Sad and Beočin are very well-informed about HIV and gender roles. They talked openly and freely about the pressure that their community and culture placed upon them.

They talked about the behaviours that are expected from them and the "myth" of virginity that is common in Roma, especially Muslim families. They talked freely about their attitudes towards choosing own partners, to wait until they are old enough before getting married, and quality of the relationship that they expect. However, the youth group from Bački Monoštor were very shy about such cross-group discussions and they were reluctant to discuss these topics.

During these community conversations, each group were asked to suggest what behavioural change communications they would like to see for their own communities. Some suggested organizing educational workshops for young people on HIV and gender issues. Others mentioned making a poster that is attractive and interesting for young people, a theatrical play or a handbook on HIV and other STDs.

## SERVICE PROVIDERS' IMPRESSIONS ABOUT ROMA

Approximately 45% of the respondents had more than 10 years of experience working with Roma populations. Of which 13% had from 6 to 10 years of experience, 24% had about 2 to 5 years of experience, and 18% had less than 1 year of experience. Half of the respondents were well-informed about the gender concept or gender divisions. The other 40% were partially informed, while 10% was not informed or did not know about these terms.

A majority (82%) of service providers stated that both Roma women and men use their services. About 5% stated that more Roma men use their services and an equal percentage of providers stated that more Roma women use their services; while 8% did not know.

When asked whether they have noticed any differences between Roma women and men in asserting their rights to social welfare, preventive health, or education, etc., 40% answered that there were differences whereas 42% stated that there were no differences and 18% stated that they did not know.

Among those noting a difference in service utilization behaviours, the following illustrated some of the differences cited:

*"Domination of Roma men over Roma women is noticeable when it comes to reproductive health and rights of women."*

*"I have an example of a Roma girl whose parents did not allow her to continue schooling in a secondary school, and she ended up married a couple of days later."*

*"Male children are always given preferential treatment while girls"*

*are restricted, isolated and oppressed."*

*"More attention is given to boys' education and I think they do not care much for girls to be educated."*

*"Girls enroll in secondary school less than boys, and even when they do, they quit more often."*

*"Difficult cultural heritage minimizes women's role. A woman becomes an object and she hardly establishes herself. Therefore she does not even think about asserting her rights outside Roma community. Even when she does, it only happens with permission from a man."*

*"Men are seen more often in public, Women are more passive in their requests."*

*"Roma women are more often and persistent in asking for social welfare and social benefits. They are using their minor children for that cause."*

*"Roma women are more active in asserting their rights for members of their families, while men are more active in advocating for the rights of the community."*

*"The only difference is that Roma women are more often given custody of children than men after a divorce. That is the case for the general population, too."*

*"Roma women fight more, they cry more, and they criticize more."*

When asked what are the most important factors influencing unequal rights among Roma population, service providers answered that the most important factor was cultural tradition, followed by a lack of education, economic factor, discrimination of Roma by the majority population, and finally political or religious factors.

- **Equal rights for both Roma women and men could be possible, according to service providers through the following means:**
- **Inform the Roma population: work with Roma parents and children, educate peer edu-**

**cators on various issues,**

- **Preserve useful elements of tradition and eliminating bad ones,**
- **Promote employment and economic self-reliance,**
- **Motivate the public to accept Roma as equal citizens,**
- **Improved Roma's access to information through media, news, lectures,**
- **Develop a special strategic plan to educate women on improved reproductive health and rights.**

The entities and resources available that can facilitate equal access to rights for Roma women and men are as follows:

- **State organs, social welfare system, police**
- **Roma associations, Coordinator for Roma issues office**
- **Commission for gender equality,**
- **Schools and teachers who are interested in working with Roma,**
- **Local self-governance entities,**
- **Media,**
- **Health services**
- **Roma populations themselves**

Among the service providers 53% of them would like to learn more about Roma gender issues; 34% would like to attend training on Roma gender issues, while 10% answered that they are not interested in any further learning, and 3% did not know.

## C. ILLUSTRATIVE CASES OF ROMA

### CASE ONE

#### ŽIVKA FAN, 27

I had a lot of problems growing up as a Roma child - without a mother, well, partially without a father as well, because he was an alcoholic - in foster families, in homes for abandoned children. It was difficult because I, my brother and sister were the only Roma children in these homes. We were always the ones to be blamed. I was in The SOS Children's Village for two years and it was awful. It was probably that difficult childhood made me fight hard now. That is why I completed school. I had no clothes to wear to school. I went there bare footed, in tattered clothes, but I kept going. I finished school and was among the better pupils. I graduated from high school with straight A's and was chosen as the best student of my class.

It is easier now, primarily because of my appearance. I'm aware I am good looking and people are interested in what I do. As soon as they see a pretty woman, it does not matter if she is a Roma, they become interested. My looks always helped me and it doesn't matter that I'm a Roma, but it did matter when I was a child to be a Roma.

When you realize that you are worth as much as a non-Roma, then you really have no problems being one.

I grew up in the village of Žabalj where there are a lot of Roma people. They all live in houses, not in settlements like Veliki rit. There is no longer the tradition that a female child should not go to school, that she only needs to get married. That tradition is dead now, little girls fight for their right to go to school, to finish elementary school and high school. If they're good at school they have the opportunity to continue their education even further. It's better now because there are scholarships, so all you need is a strong will.

I was like a mother to my sister and my brother. From the age of 8, I had to take care of them all by myself: Bathe them, get them ready for school, wash their clothes, and that was dreadful. I always looked after them. My father used to leave us alone since when I was 2 and half years old. He would leave us, lock us up inside the house, or tie us to the bed so he could go and work. He loved my mother very much and he took it really hard when she died, so he started drinking. He is an alcoholic even today but not as much as before. I look after him, regardless of what had happened. Some would say that they would never open their door to someone like him, because it was really terrifying when he gave us away and put us into that Home. But as they say, "*what didn't kill*

*you makes you stronger*". It certainly made me stronger, and whenever there is something worth fighting for, I'm able to do it.

I started struggling because of my brother and my sister. Even today I fight for them and I give them money, as if my sister wasn't married. I'm always there for them, even though my husband is of a different opinion. He is always saying: "Why do you keep running to your brother or to your sister?" He cannot understand it. If I can help my brother and my sister, I will do that. I'm going to make it in life and I'm going to be there for them.

My sister married young, and she had chosen her husband. My husband chose me. I accepted, though. I would have never married someone I hadn't wanted to, for example being sold by my father. My husband and I were best friends and then he fell in love with me. I didn't know that. I fainted when he told me. For one full year he had been trying to persuade me to marry him and then I "snapped" and did it. I have two children, but my marriage is not a good one. My husband and I see things differently. He thinks that a wife should stay at home and cook but I'm not like that, and he is also very possessive though I've never given him reason to be jealous.

I'm focused on my job and my children. I don't love him. However, I don't want to get a divorce, because my children should have both parents. I've tried to break it off with him but I'm afraid of his threats. I'm afraid that he might kill himself. I'm not ready to have that on my conscience. He's not a bad parent. Since I started working, I've kept my mind off those worries. I don't depend on him financially. I don't take any money from him. I do whatever I have to do. It is not a problem as long as I can earn money in an honest way. My father helps me. He got a good retirement pension. He loves my children and my brother helps me out too. In today's society, it is important for every woman to fight for her right to finish school, and not to get married at a young age. There are still people who want their daughters to get married at 14 so that they don't have to feed them anymore.

I think every woman should have her own will. She should progress and decide by herself when she wants to get married, who she wants to marry, and to decide whether she wants to work or not.

If my husband made the rules, I'd never be working. He said: "You won't," and I said: "I will!" And I did. A woman should fight for herself, for her education, and her world. If she thinks she's right, she should fight for it, and let no one tell her differently. "It isn't so? Well then prove it to me. Show me why it isn't so!"

Roma women feel embarrassed, for example when I talk to them about HIV. They just bow their heads and they would rather cover their ears, especially if there's a man in the room. It is as if they are afraid of men. That's my experience.

**CASE TWO****JELENA JOVANOVIĆ**

My name is Jelena Jovanović. I was born in Zemun, in 1980. I finished high school in Stara Pazova. After that I finished a business college (Higher School of Professional Business Studies) in Novi Sad. Now I'm in my second year of law studies. What I stated seems a lot for a Roma woman my age. It wasn't at all easy to obtain my education and my job at the Provincial Secretariat for Regulations, Administration and National Minorities.

In connection with my elementary school at the beginning, I like to say that every Roma child goes through a period of suffering just for being a Roma. For example, I was a great pupil. I had A's and B's. I had a cousin whose complexion was darker than mine, and when the teacher asked him what he was, he would say he was a Gypsy - that's how they call Roma. I used to answer that I was Serbian, which made the children stare at me because they knew what I was. God knows how many times I asked God why he'd made me a Roma? Why he'd made me different from others?

I was also prejudiced against Roma people. However, today I'm proud of what I am. I changed my attitude and started socializing with Roma, calling myself one of them.

What I wanted to stress is that I have lost my father relatively early in my childhood. I have finished first grade at that time. My father died and my mother stayed to look after us and struggled through her life. She deemed it vital that we went to school, and she had no problems with me.

The family you come from is very important. In the town I grew up there were a lot of Slovaks and everyone lived together, assimilated. There is a Roma settlement in the municipality of Nova Pazova where many Roma children lived all by themselves. In Stara Pazova there are no isolated Roma settlements and that helped the Roma enormously to be integrated into the society and to become successful. This is because if you live among people who consider it normal to go to school and find a job, that becomes a standard. The municipality forces you to be like everyone, to be more successful than others. However, if you are isolated from others, like it is the case with the Roma settlements in Veliki rit and Bangladeš, you were not expected to achieve anything. In those places, finishing elementary school is like graduating from university.

When I finished elementary school, my mother didn't have enough means to pay for my further education. My decision was to find work so I could go to school. We borrowed money for the entrance exam and I ranked among the first ten, so I got a scholarship. I was thrilled. Afterwards I got an invitation from Professor Svenka Savić to come to University of Philosophy. I was one of five Roma girls there. I told her everything, without knowing that she wanted to help us. This is where I

started actively working on projects regarding rights of Roma women. This is how I earned money for my education although before that I hadn't had the slightest idea what a project was, or where the University of Philosophy was.

At first it was really hard being a woman and being a Roma. Today I am active within the Roma Women's Network, I act as a coordinator. I'm of an opinion that Roma women don't have to take only the roles of housewives and mothers. I want them to obtain their place and their role in the family, to participate in the programmes of the Government Sector and Non-Governmental Organizations. The aim is to have at least some women dealing with politics, because without politics and places where we can make decisions, we can't make any progress.

I would also like to emphasize the role of family in a person's path towards success, because that road is not even close to easy. I have an enormous support from my husband who tolerates all that. Someone else would have perhaps left me by now for not being at home so often especially that I have a baby at home. Besides my job, I'm part of several projects, including this project related to the prevention of HIV among the Roma population.

I think that the Roma do not consider HIV an important issue. Educating the Roma is essential. It would be very good if there could be HIV preventive education in other places in Vojvodina for Roma women. We are planning an action concerning HIV education for the participants of Roma Women's Network, and condoms will be distributed as well.

**CASE THREE****LJILJANA LEKIĆ**

I can't think of anything regarding my ethnicity that helped me or restrained me in my education. It was the same as for everyone else. I didn't notice any degradation or special treatment for being a girl, but it certainly helped me with some teachers.

In high school and in elementary school, I was the only Roma girl in my class. My father was a doctor and my mother worked as a teacher in the school. They worked hard for everything they achieved in their lives. They wanted to be educated so they moved to Novi Sad. There were no Roma associations back then. My father used to say that you have to be the best of the best in your school and university, because that's the only way for a Roma person to succeed. My mother was very ambitious as well. And so is my brother, while I'm slightly different, I don't function that way.

My aunts finished high school, only my brother and I went to university. He became an army pilot. Now when I work with Roma children I've noticed that they look up to me. I showed them that I'd

made it and that they can be successful in schools and in life. Though I must say it was easier before. There was brotherhood and unity, and today's children don't even speak Serbian, they came from Kosovo. My brother is very proud of me. He said this is the first human job I've ever worked in my life. I think it is the right vocation for me, especially when I see results. When I see that those children listen to what I tell them. That's what keeps me satisfied and inspired to continue.

I want to help my people at least in some way. When I was younger I wanted to find a husband of my own ethnicity. But I couldn't find a common language with any of the Roma I dated. We weren't at the same intellectual level. So I'm going to get married to a Serb. I used to feel somewhat more confident when I dated Roma boys, but that was just holding me back. I was afraid that someone or his family would mind if I was a Roma.

## CASE FOUR

### IVAN PETROVIĆ

My name is Ivan Petrović. I'm 39 years old. I live in Bački Monoštor. I'm married and I have two children. I went to "22 oktobar" elementary school in Bački Monoštor and then to the Agricultural school in Sombor and became a veterinary technician.

During my high school days I was a young activist, with respected family upbringing and good conduct. Because of that, and the fact that I went to high school, and was one of the most communicative and sociable students, I was elected as treasurer of the local youth organization in Bački Monoštor. At that time, in the place where I came from, people were divided into "ours" and theirs". There were no mixed marriages between the Roma and non-Roma. It was almost unseen for someone like me to be given such a "function".

When I was in high school I had the full support of my parents and relatives, in whom my school achievements, my behavior, and my attitudes toward people inspired love, pride, and satisfaction. I also felt a certain friendly attitude from some people in the village - peasants, who saw in me their future village veterinarian who was going to be at their service 24/7. I imagined myself quite often in a white coat, doing veterinarian work.

When I finished school and came back from the Yugoslav people's army, I was supposed to start working as a veterinary technician because I was the only candidate. But then in my father's bistro came the village shepherd, slightly drunk, and in front of me said to my father: "Iva, your son is never going to be the village veterinarian because he's a Gypsy. Your grandmother and your mother used to come to our doors to beg for money, how could he ever treat my cattle?" My father was offended by that and they never spoke a word to each other again. I realized that one man was only

insolent enough to say that to my father's face, but what he'd said was probably the opinion of the majority of that primitive community. At that moment all of my dreams vanished. Realizing that cruel and unjust truth, I firmly decided to change my vocation and do something creative so I could make use of my qualities and affirm myself and my people.

In the summer of 1998, I was one of the initiators and founders of KUD "Rumunka", a cultural and artistic association, which was the first Roma non-governmental organization in the Western-Bačka district. Together with a few like-minded individuals I concluded that there was a need to organize in order to improve the quality of our people's life in Bački Monoštor. That way we could fight for our place under the sun, stand up for our rights, not turn our back to our responsibilities, and thus get integrated into the modern way of life and live like every other human being.

While working in KUD "Rumunka", I initiated and participated in the realization of numerous projects and activities related to culture, sport, education, economic empowerment and development of the Roma community. Since I considered education essential, especially for a representative of the Roma community, besides my formal education, I attended various lectures and seminars concerning volunteerism, project writing, democracy development, and community development.

In my opinion, by investing a decade of my life and my work into Roma people and Roma problems, I've learned, seen, and experienced a lot. I also feel that it should all be used and handed down to the people who need that sort of help, so that they could lift our people to a higher level- become equal partners in their local communities, integrate into the modern way of life, and become a part of Europe, as they already are by nature.

## CASE FIVE

### BOŽIDAR STOJKOV

In my case, it all happened purely by chance. I enrolled into a grammar school by chance, although I wanted to study business. In my hometown, Novo Miloševo, and in the entire Banat, we've always had a great respect for our tradition. I was the first Roma to enroll into university in 25 years. Before me, a cousin of mine studied Marxism for a year and then his father told him: "My son, we have enough money, why would you need to study?" And he listened to his father and came back home. I was the first one to go to university after him.

In Banat, our Roma people do not care about education. For them it's a great thing if someone finishes elementary school. Girls go to school only to learn how to sign their names for four years maximum. They are all dedicated to their work and trade. Only when I arrived here and met people from other parts of Serbia, I got introduced to the existence of affirmative measures. Only when I

brought all the knowledge home, did they realize how important it all was.

Even now a lot of people call me, and they ask for advice or information. They've realized that it is important to know what's happening, to be at the source of information, to be in Novi Sad, close to institutions. Now they see that it matters and I feel that I'm a role-model to their children. They ask me about my school days and they work hard as well.

When I started working with an NGO, we worked on developing the Roma community. I found out that similar problems appear in all Roma communities.

I am glad to be breaking down prejudices and stereotypes about Roma people. Today there are affirmative measures. Roma students can get scholarships and they can live in dormitories. All you need to do is make an effort, work hard, and keep trying.

My parents have integrated into the community but they respect their tradition, which means that a man is the head of the house. He makes money, and he makes decisions. A wife's role is to be a housewife and she doesn't have the right to go to school because she has to get married and have children. Being a man means that you have some privileges. Young people in our community do not get married because they want to, but because their parents tell them to.

Luckily, I won't get married like that. I will not let my parents tell me which woman is right for me and our house. I have a girlfriend here in Novi Sad, this is where we met. My parents have realized that I can do everything on my own. I can fight for myself because I finished school and I'm going to university. My brother got married. Actually, one morning my parents said to him: "We got you married, son." Only then did he find that it was to a girl he'd seen twice before that morning. The whole family told him that that's the way it had to be, and that they wanted what's best for him. And he got married. He has a son now, too.

My brother supports me now and I'm glad he does. I expected him to rebel because I don't have to get married according to our customs. But no, he gives me support. My sister got married that way. One day my parents just said: "Come here, daughter, this is your husband." And those marriages last, no matter what. Right after they are married, they have children and what then? They have to make it work. They are not the ones who decide. Their parents tell them what to do. My father tells my brother what to do, and my mother tells my sister-in-law what to do.

Roma people don't think about HIV, or about the consequences. No one even wants to get tested. They use condoms only to prevent pregnancies, but they don't consider HIV. I talk to my friends about it, and they find it all strange because they've never thought about it before. At the moment I like being some kind of a leader.

## CASE SIX

### ALEKSANDAR JOVANOVIĆ

At the beginning of my education, from elementary school where I was the only Roma child, I didn't have any serious problems. I was born in a village and things were different there. But in high school it all changed. The teachers found it strange that someone belonging to the Roma population wanted to continue education. Some of them used to ask me when I was going to get married, or why on earth I wanted to go to school, and so on. However, I didn't pay attention to that.

I lived in Stari Banovci, a place near Stara Pazova. There was one teacher in my high school who I still remember. When we had oral examinations, he used to say: "Come on, Gipsy, stand up." That was, kind of, really strange. I didn't mind it much at the time, but as you grow up and become mature, you realized how disturbing those things really are. You know, I mean, he never said to anyone else: "Come on...any nationality...stand up."

However, when you have the support from your parents and you want to continue your education, people start seeing you differently. Some people who encountered problems similar to mine simply gave up school. I think that the same things happen in elementary schools, too. We did analysis in some schools in Novi Sad. When children find that no one wants to play with them, or even to communicate with them, they simply quit school. Then, and you can see that, those children beg on the streets and do things they aren't supposed to be doing.

When we talk about discrimination, I think it is the worst in education. There is some kind of a clandestine discrimination. When you enter a classroom you can see that the Roma child is always sitting at the back of the classroom. Why is it like that, why can't that child sit at the front. Or if there are two pupils sitting at one desk, it's always two Roma children together, they never mix. If there is only one child, it will sit alone. When you look at it psychologically, that is exactly why children leave school. I can tell you about one child from the fifth grade, who sat at the back. He told me: "I don't know whether I'll continue going to school, because I have no friends here. I carry a ball with me. I play with it during recess because no one wants to play with me. That ball is my only friend." Imagine how horrible that is. Children don't want to open up. They don't want to say what the real problem is. They do it indirectly, and state those problems without even knowing it.

I'm finishing my study at the Tutor Academy and I've got three exams left. I first enrolled in a business college, but then I realized that it wasn't what I really wanted. So I entered the Tutor Academy and I would like to work in pre-school education. We'll see how that's going to turn out.

As far as gender equality is concerned, in general, it was easier for me because I'm male. It's not only

true for the Roma population, but it is more visible. For example, if both daughters get married and there is just one male child left, he inherits everything. That is, daughters don't get anything. When a girl finishes elementary school they tell her: "Why would you continue education? If you go to high school, a college or even university – you won't be able to get married."

There are, in my opinion, awful examples of how female children are treated differently by their parents than male children, and those things vary according to counties, in Srem, Banat, or Bačka. In Banat, for example, the father chooses a bride for his son, while we don't have that here in Srem, or in Bačka. I'm already married, and I have a child.

Women are completely marginalized. At the time when I went to university, a relatively small number of Roma girls wanted to get educated. And when they are supposed to go to college or university, maybe not a majority, but certainly a great number of girls get married during that period. Our culture is like that: Girls should get married and have children, and the man should provide for everything else. I don't agree with that.

I was also in a better position than my sisters. They both wanted to go to high school. One of them finished it while the other one didn't, and they got married relatively late. It was a big problem at the place we lived, because everyone was asking when they were going to get married. They were 24 – actually, who were going to marry them. I found that horrible even then. People come to our house asking my mother: "When is your daughter going to get married?" I mean, why would they care? It's her life. Let her do what she wants. In general, my parents didn't care about that. They even found it funny. I don't. Nor will I ever let anyone interfere with my life.

Let me tell you about a boy who studies with us. We are friends and all. He is from Banat and at the moment he is expecting his father to find him a bride. So, he left his home. He came here to Novi Sad. He goes to university. He works. Still he expects his father to find him a bride. He does have the right to choose, but he considers it normal that he waits for his father to find a girl, to organize a wedding and everything. I spoke to him as well as with his father, but they told me that their tradition is deeply-rooted and that there are customs they would never disobey. I think that the worst thing is the fact that the bride has to be a virgin. The rule is that if she's not a virgin, they shouldn't take her. And if she is, then they have to show the sheets stained with her blood, and celebrate that. I find that abnormal if a person wants to live with someone. If there is no blood on the sheets, even if the girl IS a virgin, she's going to be in trouble.

There is also a strange thing connected with the Roma in Banat, where there is a Gypsy court. It consists of older people dealing with certain problems. It is not exactly like that now, but it used to be. If someone cheats someone else in trade, then the court listens to both sides of the story and comes to a decision. Just like in a real court, but it's theirs and they make decisions on all kinds of

things. They didn't want to go to the State court. They went to their own. We didn't have that. In Banat, people at least finish their elementary education and there are no people begging on the streets. The first time I saw that was when I came to Belgrade. We don't have those kinds of settlements, no such thing.

## CASE SEVEN

### MARIZELA BALOG

My name is Marizela Balog. I live in Bački Monštor. I finished elementary school and I work as a caterer by vocation.

In elementary school I was a bit more reserved than other children. During recess some children would call us "Gipsy" from time to time. The girls I spent my time with were also Roma and they felt humiliated as I did. We merely had any contact with the non-Roma children in the class. They used to avoid us, laugh at us, or again call us "names". When I talk to my friends, we always remember how we used to get humiliated because of our ethnicity, and how that hostility still exists even now when we see our former classmates at reunions.

In 1998, I became an active member of KUD "Rumunka" and a lot of things changed. I participated in a great number of seminars and educational programmes. One time, in cooperation with a Roma organization, we traveled to Bulgaria where I made a presentation about our organization. I also worked as a tutor assistant in "Vera Guconja" kindergarten in Bački Monštor. I did choreography in KUD "Rumunka". We took part in various performances and competitions. Therefore I got the idea to gather all the young Roma women so that we could organize a "female workshop". Since Roma children often leave school or just go to school irregularly, our aim was to have a place they could go to and use their free time in a better way; as well as to get empowered and informed about their rights. Also, I was the initiator of diverse activities primarily dedicated to empowering Roma women, e.g. sewing classes, and making other things that were exhibited at ethnic festivals.

For all of my success and support in everything I do, I owe my gratitude to the activists of KUD "Rumunka". The time I spent socializing and working on various projects has made me braver and more self-confident, and I've realized that I know and I can, without prejudices towards my ethnicity.

## CASE EIGHT

### SANELA DILJAJ

My name is Sanela. I'm 24 years old. I live in Beočin and I'm a Roma woman.

I'm currently on my final year of studying law. My path to university wasn't easy. On the contrary, it was very hard not just because I'm a Roma but even harder because I'm a Roma woman. I belong to the Muslim religion and it is extremely rare for a Roma Muslim to go to university. It is unusual. There are other Roma students but they are Orthodox. I'm the only female for now. I think that there is one more girl who enrolled in a business college this year.

I was lucky, or unlucky, to be born in a mixed marriage. My mother is Serbian and she influenced my father to send us to school, to educate us, especially the female children. There are four of us, three sisters and a brother. Things have always been easier for my brother, of course. He'll inherit the estate, as well as everything our father earns.

We are a poor family. My mother and my father finished only elementary school. My father has always said: "I'm going to provide my girls an education, that'll be theirs!" That's his gift to us since we won't be able to inherit the house. Our education is going to be their success as well as ours. I remember how my sisters had problems doing math, so they went to private classes even though it was expensive, and they studied hard.

I really loved school, and I fit into the group nicely. I can speak Serbian, unlike other Roma children. My parents provided me support until high school, because when I wanted to enroll in high school, I was the only one studying for the entrance exam. I had no idea what an entrance exam was. I loved math, and I was one of the best in class at math. The exam turned out not to be such a problem. After studying for a few days I managed to get into the graphic art high school. And then people began criticizing: "How come she's going to high school, and for four more years, and she's Roma..."

I was an excellent student. I'd expected it, and my parents had expected it. After all, it was what I wanted. All of my friends went to high school, so it was only natural that I should go, too. At that time none of my friends in Beočin were Roma.

But then a problem arose because we had no money for the bus fare or for books. My father worked very hard but he couldn't provide for all three of us... and then the Roma Association came into being. Since I was among the best students, I got an offer to teach Roma children from first to fourth grade. I helped them with math, with homework, and I earned my monthly bus ticket. The Roma Association used to buy it for me during all four years of high school.

And then the university came. Up till then, my parents had been extremely supportive. But when I turned 19 and wanted to go to university, all the support, moral as well as finance, was gone. They were afraid that I would get married, that I would disappoint them, and they were scared of what all our neighbors would say. My father was afraid that they would turn out to be right when they used

to tell him: "Why do you invest so much in those girls, why all that education, it would be better to invest in the house, in your son." But no, he'd been trying hard, and spending all that money on us. So when I went to university they said: "Now this is too much, no way!" I think they weren't ready for that, and then the boyfriends came. They couldn't understand that you could have both. Yes, at 19, you have to have a boyfriend.

During my education there were situations when teachers would say: "You are Roma" in front of the entire class, and it was really embarrassing, like – what are you doing here, is it hard for you... but generally I had no other problems. My grades weren't lower because I was a Roma, not in high school, nor in the university. The professors were supportive. I also never had problems with friends. I've always fit in, maybe because my mother is Serbian.

I had friends who used to say: "Well, you're half ours." Maybe I took after my mother. I don't know. I've never thought about it. From other Roma girls I hear things like: "They don't want to accept me. I'm Roma. I'm always set aside." But I've always been with the biggest crowds. I like to say that I'm both, that two religions can function in one person, and I'm sure proud of it. I reckon my parents can trust me. I have three more exams to pass and I'll finish university. They say that when I graduate they will organize a big supper. They'll invite all our relatives so they can see I did it. And how a Roma girl, a Muslim can graduate from university, and she's a girl, what a success!

When I talk to my parents, they tell me that I can choose a boyfriend, a husband. But when I tell them who my boyfriend is they say: "Well, he's not right for you." They expect my future husband to have a PhD or something. I have no idea what they expect – no one I choose will be good enough for them. It will be something like this – this is the one I chose, do you agree, and that's it!

I guess I'll raise my children differently. Because I've seen what it feels like to grow up in a suspicious environment, and I've learned that a woman can be successful and that she can stay single at 25 and still be very desirable. That's what my experience has taught me.

My father made a big step when he married a woman of different religion and nationality, and he'd done a lot for us. Who knows what my life would be like if my mother was a Roma Muslim.

I started working in the Roma Association in Beočin when I need to earn my bus fares as I started going to high school. And I've been active there for 10 years. I focus on educating young people. At the moment I find it most important that pre-school children learn Serbian, because it's the basic barrier. I also emphasize the role of Roma women because I feel that the only way for them to be successful is to go to school and get educated. That is my most important task.

**CASE NINE****MARINA SIMEUNOVIĆ**

In elementary school I was the best in my class and that enraged the non-Roma pupils. I remember that I was chosen class president in the first and second grade. I was really a model student. I wanted to know everything. I asked all sorts of questions and I was the best.

My teacher supported me but she had parents coming to the school complaining about the Roma girl being the class president. When I first started going to school, I'd already known the alphabet, both Latin and Cyrillic. I could write my name and surname in Latin letters. I'd learned the multiplication table. I'd known division, addition, and subtraction. And then I went to the fifth grade and things took their course. Everything was all right. In the seventh grade my neighbor became our classroom teacher and her daughter went to the same class. Again there were some problems. There was a kind of rivalry between the two of us.

I didn't tilt at windmills. I just wanted to prove that I deserved something. I was good at it and I guess that in time I earned respect. During high school I also felt discriminated against. There was always someone, but I had protection from the stronger ones. My classroom teacher adored me. I know I'd been privileged and that it was because of my ethnicity, because there weren't a lot of us, so my teacher wanted to help me in some way. He never gave me better marks. I already had A's. But he gave me moral support when I had problems with one other teacher who once called me an imposter, and made up things about me. Having my classroom teacher's support made me feel safer.

I'm trying to create a state of mind, both in myself and in my environment, that there exists some kind of a balance, a harmony. I've been doing that since I was a child, then a girl. You know, in every form of communication concerning relationships between men and women, I'm trying to reach that harmony.

There has been a step forward. When I remember some of the stories that my mother, my aunt, and my grandmother used to tell me, I realized that improvements have taken place. For example, my cousin who is only 8 years older than me couldn't go to university although she was a good student. She wanted to enroll in a university but her father didn't let her while my parents offered me their support. I'm the first Roma girl from my neighborhood to study at a university. Someone had to break the ice. In Ljubovija, there isn't so much discrimination and the influence of tradition is not that powerful.

For a year and a half I worked in the Roma Students Association and I'd been trying to raise and

discuss the women's question, but it didn't go as well as I'd planned. It wasn't the right time to unite, so I joined the Vojvodina Roma Women Network. I'm still quite new at that but I know what I want. I know how to contribute, and I hope I'll be good at it. I think that women need open conversation, but without men. I believe that there are topics to be discussed in front of men, and topic to be discussed without men. Talking to women is what's going to get them moving. It will empower them emotionally.

**CASE TEN****BRANISLAV JOVANOVIĆ**

I was born in Belgrade, on May 25<sup>th</sup> 1989. I'm a Roma. I finished elementary school in Stari Banovci, where I live right now. I finished high school in Stara Pazova and I'm currently studying in Novi Sad.

I had problems in elementary school because I was the only Roma pupil in my generation. I came across rejection on the side of my peers, but I never pretended to be something else. In high school there were no conflicts related to my ethnicity, because at the time I'd already been working for the well-being of my people. Both my teachers and my friends accepted me as someone different from the other Roma because I largely contributed to my people and I seemed to be "above".

I'm currently facilitating my people to a great extent. I participate in a large number of projects dedicated to them. In 2005, I was one of the initiators and the founder of a Roma organization in the place I live. Today, that's the only association that deals with problems of young Roma. I coordinated a great number of projects in connection with Roma youth. I don't want to give that up. I think that I'm going to dedicate a major part of my life to my current job. I'm really interested in journalism and in the future I see myself in a government institution defending the rights of my people.

I never had any privileges for being a male. By the way, I grew up among women. In my village where I grew up there were very few boys of my age, so I socialized mainly with girls. I've learned a lot from them, mostly about seducing girls and understanding the female side of the story. Thus I've always been a shoulder to cry on. Perhaps I was even a protection to the girls because I always went out with them, and I represented some kind of safety. There are some negative stereotypes concerning Roma families, like that women are discriminated against, but we've never had that. Here we are mostly emancipated, and women work here as well as men. They finish schools and usually have permanent employments. Nevertheless, there were cases of Roma people of conservative thinking. For example in some tradition it was common for a man to beat his wife when he gets drunk.



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