

**SEMI-ANNUAL CONFERENCE  
SAN FRANCISCO  
JANUARY 24-25, 2013**

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**Empowering Marginalized Populations: Lessons from Romani Women's Grassroots Initiatives**

Thursday, January 24, 2013  
3:30 – 5:00 pm

***Session Organizer:***

- Katalin Barsony, Executive Director, Romedia Foundation (Hungary);
- Violeta Krasnic, Program Director for Europe and Central Asia, Global Fund for Women

***Panelists:***

- Katalin Barsony, Executive Director, Romedia Foundation (Hungary)
- Sumka Bučan, Program Director/Country Representative, CARE International North West Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- Gabriela Hrabnova, Policy Coordinator, European Roma Grassroots Organizations Network (Belgium)

***Facilitator:***

- Violeta Krasnic, Program Director for Europe and Central Asia, Global Fund for Women

***Sponsors:***

- Global Fund for Women
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Violeta Krasnic opened the session by welcoming the panelists and introducing the topic of social and political circumstances of Romani women.

The first panelist, Gabriela Hrabnova, provided some background on the Roma: Roma communities are extremely diverse groups and are found all over the world. In some countries they are nomadic communities, however, they also settle in a place for several generations. The largest Roma populations are located in Western Europe. Discrimination against Roma is rampant and they are often excluded from public spaces, schools, etc. Women are a primary target of such discrimination. Moreover, Roma communities have become dependent on state support. As a result the communities were the target of assimilation efforts and Roma culture has been suppressed. It wasn't until the 1990's that governments and civil society started focusing on Roma. The European Union has had an important role in this new movement to better integrate Roma into society.

The ERGO Network focuses on four strategies: health, employment, education and housing (but the implementation of these strategies is made more difficult because of corruption). Organizations supporting the empowerment of Roma against discrimination have almost all closed due to a lack of resources and support. In continuing approaches to inclusion it is crucial to require the participation of Roma people, especially women, since they are important agents of change.

The second panelist, Sumka Bučan, began by introducing CARE international's work supporting Roma women activists. Target countries of this work are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. Sumka stated that many Roma do not publically identify as Roma because of fear of discrimination, causing population estimates to be skewed.

Education and employment rates are very low among Roma, and housing conditions are poor. These poor conditions bring additional hazardous to health – for instance, communities have limited access to clean water sources compared to the general populations. Moreover, Roma women have little access to education, and this reality worsens as grades increase. Unemployment is very high in these countries, but the situation of Romani women is much worse than women in the general population. In addition, gender-based violence (GBV) and health issues among Roma communities are below the UN development goals.

Sumka listed the issues to be addressed as:

- Social inclusion
- Discrimination against Romani women
- Access to education
- Access to the labor market

During the "decade of Roma inclusion" there have been many challenges, such as the lack of gender sensitivity, and the lack of government investment to implement National Action Plans. However, the CARE Gender Equality Program is working to improve the implementation of existing national legislation on GBV and the response from government and civil society towards Roma communities through the implementation of projects that seek to empower Romani women and to promote their active inclusion and their rights in the Balkan states. One means of doing this is using theater to demonstrate the types of discrimination women have to confront, which is helping create awareness in the local communities.

Roma women are beginning to organize themselves as activists and participate in the political sphere but they need a great deal of support. Romani women are agents of change and they need to receive the right tools to be able to continue their activism. There is also a need to raise awareness and sensitivity in the community towards Roma and Romani women in order to support their work.

Participants then watched the following video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgWMj5ULlmw>

The final panelist, Katalin Barsony, stated that being a Romani NGO is difficult in Europe as there is very little support for this work, creating a need to find new strategies to raise women's voices. The situation is complex for the following reasons:

- The biggest problem for grassroots NGOs is that funding, which comes from private donors, is project-based and there is no possibility to get significant core, institutional support to guarantee growth and stability.
- Non-European funders have other priorities and only a superficial understanding of the context.
- Even for project funding, high profile projects are needed. Public relations are extremely important but know-how in this field among activists very limited. The language and profile of Romani grassroots NGOs has been shaped to fit in the EU priorities framework and has not gone through innovations in communicating needs and goals.
- Governments in Europe are instating policies that are not necessarily supportive of Roma communities.

- Because of significant distortion of the actual situation of Roma, there is a strong need for the development of Roma's "own voice" at the grassroots level. Why at the grassroots? Because no major medium for Roma exists (TV, radio). This process can start on a small scale and multiplying effect/development of networks can lead to actual results.
- There is no Roma representation in the European commission or parliament.

Because of the economic crisis in Europe, and the exclusion of Roma from civil society, it is difficult to maintain a progressive critical voice to fight the exclusionist activities of governments. NGOs are very small, and they are not growing. Although activists are attempting to build up more ways to communicate their goals, even companies fear that if they design policies that support Roma inclusion (in advertising, for example) they might lose costumers because of the racism and discrimination against Roma.

Another challenge to communicate Romani women's voices during these tough economic times stems from the difficulty of finding mediums of public communication like TV or radio.

- The tone of the debate – Roma in political speech and media is polarizing, aggressive and has undertones of extreme nationalism and racism
- The "ghettoization" of Roma, women in particular - need programs to get target groups out of their closed environment. At the same time, realities of Romani girls' lives have to be taken into account. They often lack self-confidence when among majority women and need to stay close to family.
- Solutions: training outside community, building of regional, national, cross-border networks to enhance opportunities of employment outside hometown/village.
- Romani women have a strong tradition of oral history, which makes for often excellent communication skills passed down from one generation to the next.

Being Roma means being stateless. Roma don't belong to just one state. Moreover, the problems facing Roma communities are extreme: hunger, hate crimes, etc. But new innovative approaches from women's NGOs are making progress towards bringing women to the global debate. Nevertheless, organizations that advocate Romani women's needs are most often non-Roma. Romani women need more Roma NGOS and the community needs to invest in the younger generation to create change. Buvero Roma women citizen journalism is training young Roma women to acquire skills for critical thinking, and tools to empower others, set their own goals, and create strategies to bring their voices to the municipal level. Empowerment is the key. If women learn how to communicate their problems, it will facilitate conversation, and without continuous sustainable support of Roma NGOs, change will not be possible.

### **Question & Answer:**

The first question related to engaging in inclusive grantmaking that would include Roma and Romani women. Sumca responded that CARE includes Romani activists from the start in the planning of projects, to jointly develop the actions to be implemented. Women are included in the research, the participatory learning, and the development of recommendations on how to improve the participation of women, including Romani women.

One participant asked why the videos shown were so different and if there is a difference between the two styles in terms of impact. Katalin responded that portraying Roma women in active roles is

important in promoting a change in perception of Romani women and the larger Roma community. This differs from what is commonly seen on TV where Roma women are often portrayed as poor and defenseless.

Another participant asked how Roma women who are not activists are able to raise their voices. The panelists responded that the eastern traditions do not necessarily allow women to have a loud voice in the family. Romani women are really in a subservient position at home, and are mostly regarded as caretakers. They are also largely illiterate. If a woman wants to speak, she needs to fight for this right inside her family, in her community, and the community of men, and only then can she speak publically. This makes it more difficult for women to have a voice. Drawing back from their personal experiences, the panelists state the difficulty of speaking up within their families. The new generations are crucial to changing this.

A participant asked, since the panelists have been talking about a traditional community, if there has been backlash from some women. The panelists responded that Hungarian women have not been very open to support. Sometimes it is necessary to include minority issues among women's issues. Avoiding stereotypes is necessary, but sometimes supporting communities may not approve of the choices to represent the Romani community. Family members sometimes are the ones that seem to be opposing change. A way to do this is creating spaces or activities where women can leave the traditional settings and experience a time as themselves, without children, without house chores, without the traditional restrictions. Self-esteem support is needed when first stepping out of traditional roles.

Another participant asked which movements are the strongest allies in the panelists' work. The panelists responded that Jewish groups, LGBT groups, Amnesty international, etc. have all been strong allies. But it is not easy to find such allies. It is very unpopular to support Roma people, especially in politics.

One participant asked how funders can be supportive. The panelists responded that capacity-building is very important, through small business initiatives, education in human rights, etc. Even small projects are important to promote the independence of Romani women so that they can begin thinking on their own and can raise their voices. Letting youth promote change is also very powerful.

Panelists were asked about the use of new technologies for communication efforts. They responded that the internet is very important for communication within the communities. Families are spread geographically, so this helps them maintain communications. NGOS also use new technologies to build the movement. NGOs still face attacks, so they are learning about how to communicate their messages with these technologies. Engaging youth on how to showcase their realities through photos, videos, etc., is also helping to increase the use of technology in creating a Roma movement. Online communication campaigns are also important, for reaching a larger public attendance and building support.

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**Remarks by Katalin Bársony,  
Executive Director, Romedia Foundation (Hungary)**

**Survival and growth strategies of grassroots Romani NGOs**

- The biggest problem for grassroots NGOs is that funding, which comes from private donors such as OSF, is project-based and there is no possibility to get significant core, institutional support to guarantee growth and stability. Description of a “typical” funding strategy. How can grassroots Romani NGOs survive?
- Non-European funders have other priorities and superficial understanding of the context. How to better communicate?
- Even for project funding high profile projects are needed so PR is extremely important but know-how in this field among activists very limited. The language and profile of Romani grassroots NGOs has been shaped to fit in the EU priorities framework and has not gone through innovations in communicating needs and goals. Why? What could have brought such innovations?
- Support from the for-profit sector. “Roma subject” is shunned by the CSR policies of both multinational and smaller companies – not good PR for them (in Hungary, even the 1% deduction on taxes for charitable contributions has not helped Romani organizations). Is it because of Romani NGOs’ lack of innovative communication strategies or does lack of interest from companies limit the need for grassroots Romani NGOs to innovate in terms of both strategy and communications?
- Because of significant distortion of the actual situation of Roma, need for the development of “own voice” at the grassroots. Why at the grassroots? No major medium for Roma exists (TV, radio). The situation of the media in Hungary for instance is one of high polarization, the interest of Roma being to have an independent voice. This process can start on a small scale and multiplying effect/development of networks can lead to actual results. Funding is needed but funders need to have a deeper understanding of the framework in which communications coming from Roma have to be placed.

**Example – why Romani “citizen journalist” girls can make a change inside and outside their communities?**

- The tone of the debate – Roma in political speech and media (including TV reality shows etc., talent shows) / polarization / aggressive tone / extreme nationalism / racism
- The „ghettoization“ of Roma, women in particular - need programs to get target group out of their closed environment / at the same time, realities of Romani girls' life have to be taken into account – often lack of self-confidence when among majority women + need to stay close to family
- “ghettoization” – main problematic: duality between prospects inside and outside the community
- Solutions: training outside community, building of regional, national, cross-border networks to enhance opportunities of employment outside hometown/village
- BUT social engagement inside the community – women are drivers of change in their families, neighborhoods
- Romani women particularly to target / tradition of oral history makes for often excellent communication skills passed down from one generation to the next
- Citizen journalism training programs can be built to have the most effective mix of cross-border/national and community engagement
- Video production process from beginning to end – develops creative thinking and self-fulfillment
- Chain reaction inside the community about image of community from the outside

# Roma Women Empowerment

**CARE International  
North West Balkans**

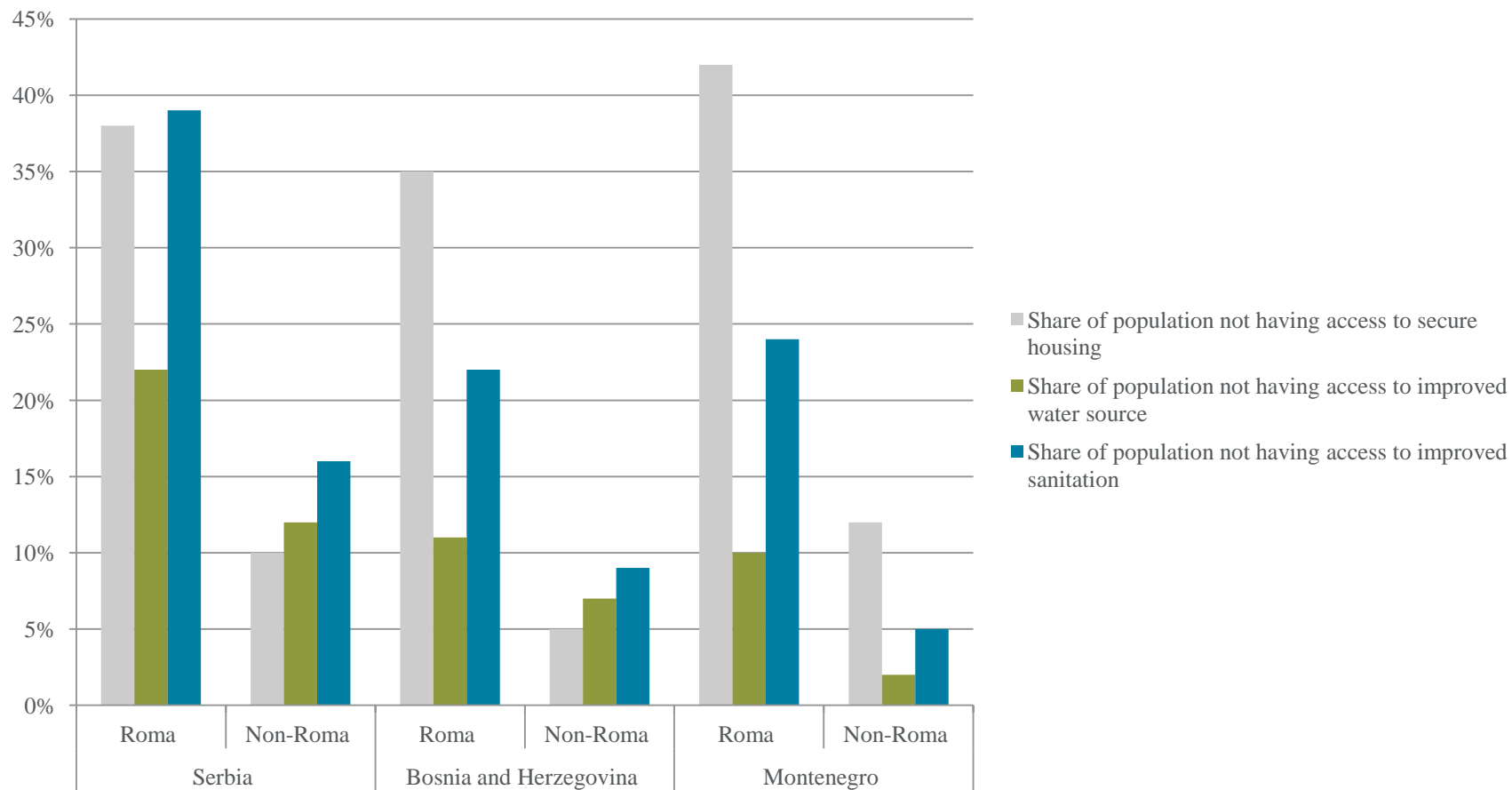
Presented by:  
Sumka Bučan



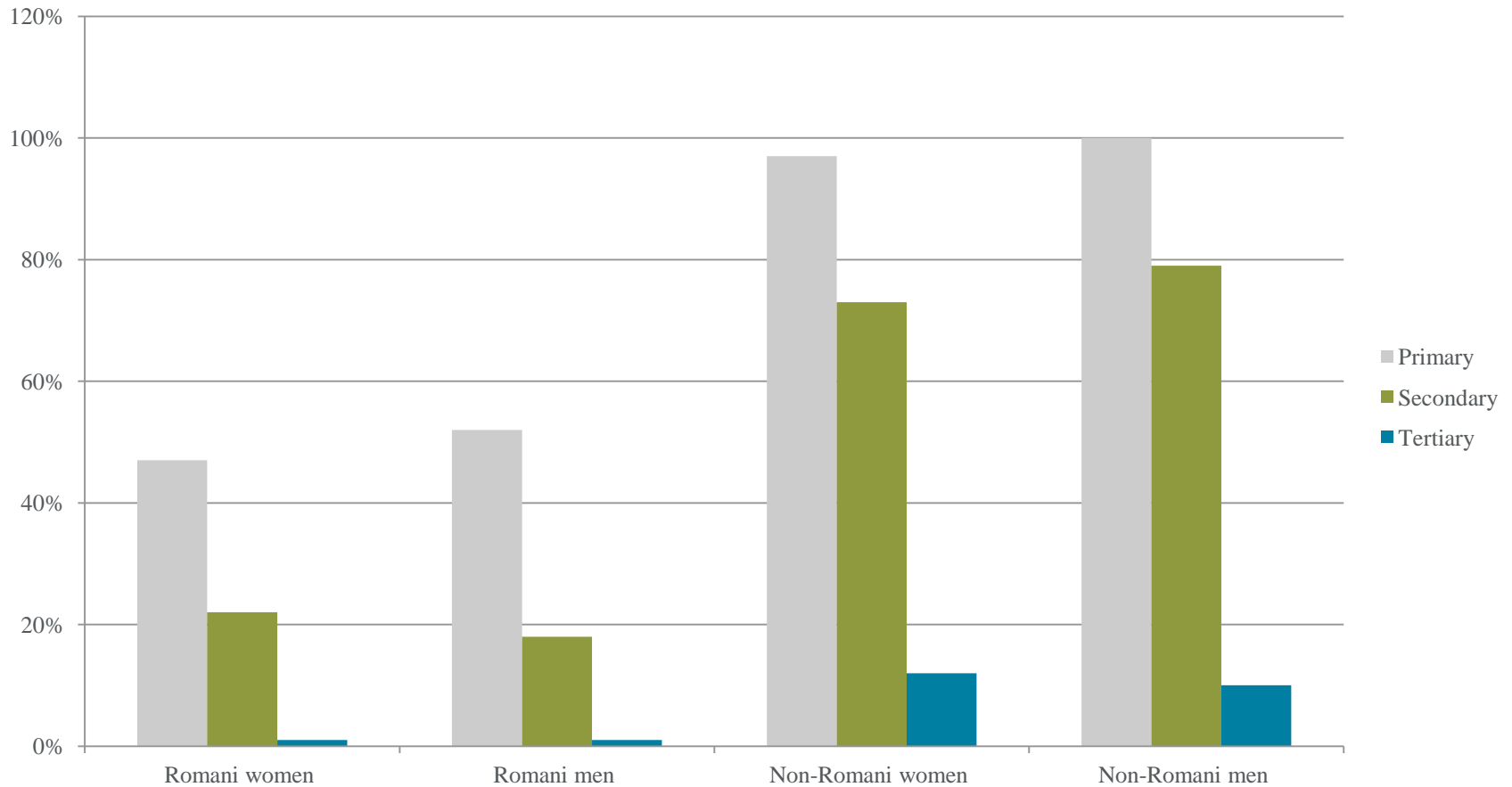
- Target countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo
- Roma /RAE population:
  - 500,000 – 600,000 in Serbia (inc. 50,000 displaced from Kosovo)
  - 80,000 - 100,000 in Bosnia and Herzegovina,
  - 20,000 – 27,000 in Montenegro and
  - 35,000 in Kosovo
- UN Agencies' surveys: unemployment rates higher than among non-Roma (up to more than 50%), educational attainments are still lower (up to 1/3 of the Romani women are illiterate) and that the housing conditions of many Roma are health hazardous.



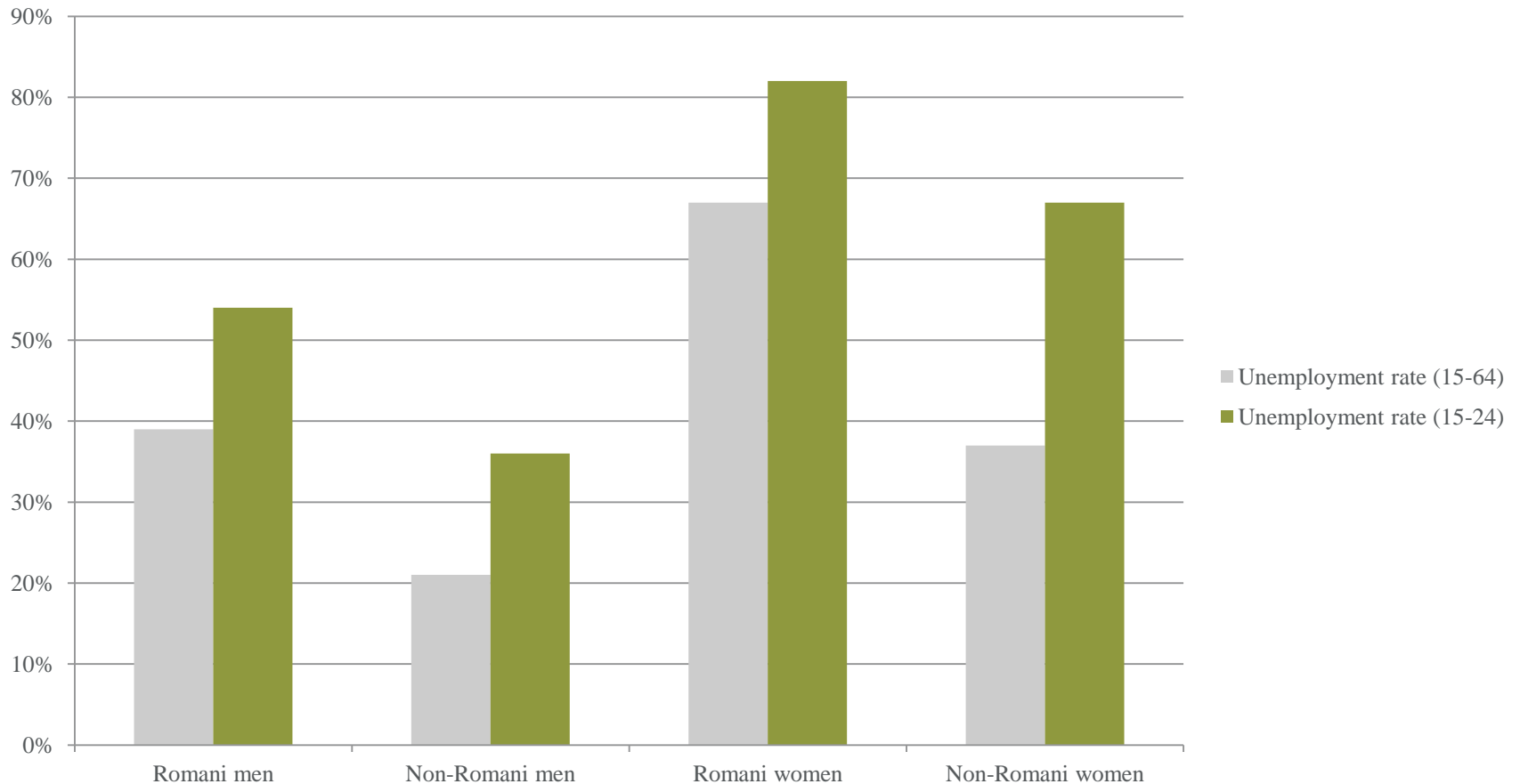
# Housing Conditions



# Access to Education (BiH)



# Access to Labour Market (Serbia)



# GBV and Health issues



Bosnia and Herzegovina – Survey among Romani women (Rights for all/ICVA 2010)	Yes	No	Don't know/ no answer
Do you personally know a woman who has suffered or is still suffering from domestic violence	76%	24%	
Has she suffered this violence more than once	90.43%	8.72%	0.85%
Were children present	71.55%	27.57%	0.88%
Have you suffered or are you still suffering physical violence	43.19%	51%	6%

Serbia - Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS 3) UNICEF, 2005	Roma	Overall Population	Envisaged MDG rate 2015
infant mortality rate 2005	26.0	8.0	4.5
under-five mortality rate 2005	29.0	9.2	5.0

# Issues (to be) addressed

- Social Inclusion
- Discrimination of Roma and Romani women in particular
- Access to education, decreasing drop-out rate and awareness raising about importance of education
- Access to labour market
- Health and sanitary conditions and access to services
- Housing and living conditions
- Strengthening RW civil society organisations/networks
- Building relationship with non-Roma HR organisations
- Public and political participation of Romani women
- Preventing gender based violence and trafficking
- Early and arranged marriages, child labour

# Policy Environment / Framework

- Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015)
- National Action Plans addressing Housing, Health, Employment and Education
- Gender equality legislation and strategies

## Issues:

- Lack of gender sensitivity and GSM in NAPs
- Lack of gov's' investment to implement NAPs
- Effectiveness of measures implemented by gov's
- Relatively weak position of Roma CSOs
- Kosovo not a part of the Decade of Roma Inclusion

# CARE's Gender Equality Programme Strategy



<u>Impact Group</u>		
Women and girls vulnerable to violence, discrimination and poverty		
Roma/Ashkali/Egyptian Women and Girls	Young women vulnerable to all types of violence, trafficking included	Female-headed household affected by poverty

<u>Impact Goal</u>
All women and girls have full life opportunities and social justice



4 domains of change

Objective 1: Improved implementation of existing national legislation related to gender based violence and discrimination of women (policies and institutional support mechanisms)	Objective 2: Changed/Improved attitudes and behaviors of relevant communities and government institutions towards gender equality and masculinity (combat all forms of discrimination)	Objective 3: Strengthened sustainability of key regional, national and/or local civil society organizations and networks promoting gender equality and diversity, in the context of social inclusion and non-violence	Objective 4: Enhanced life opportunities for economically and socially deprived women & girls
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# CARE's Projects in the Balkan

- **Roma Women Empowerment Project (2008 - 2011),**  
implemented in BiH, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro with an aim to to strengthen the position of Roma women in Western Balkan societies through supporting efforts of organizations, institutions and Ministries involved in anti-discrimination, empowerment and minority rights promotion campaigns in the target countries.
- **Active Inclusion and Rights for Romani Women (2011-2014),**  
a follow up project whose purpose is to strengthen Romani women organisations to promote gender-responsive National Action Plans and to monitor their implementation.
- **Roma Women Empowerment Project BiH(2010-2012),**  
strengthening capacity of NGOs representing interests of Roma women to fight discrimination and address minority rights issues and vulnerability of Roma women in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- **Choices and Chances for Roma Girls Serbia (2008-2013),**  
increasing the enrollment rate and access to education for Roma girls
- **Support to National Action for Roma Inclusion BiH (2011-2013)**
- **Women Economic Empowerment Project (2011-2014)**
- **Empowerment and Integration of Roma in Serbia and BiH (2010-2013)**



# Main Programmatic Interventions and Innovations



- Needs-based organisational Capacity Building, TA, and mentoring
- Networking (building a country based and regional network) and best practice sharing
- Developing skills and knowledge of Romani women leaders
- Coalition building with non-Roma organisations
- Research and policy analysis
- Advocacy, lobbying and political participation
- Awareness raising campaigns
- Community development and awareness raising actions

# Illustration



# Highlights and Milestones

- Roma Women Networks' established
- I am a Roma Women campaign
- Equality for All campaign
- Month of Roma women activism 2012 – 8th of March to 8th of April
- National Policies towards Romani Women regional research
- Regional Research on Romani Women Political Participation and Access to Education
- Roma Women networks establish national coalitions with non-Roma Organizations
- Analysis related to gender equality and participation of Romani women in institutions in BiH, Serbia and Montenegro
- Member of network from Serbia becomes a member for Council for Gender Equality
- Member of network in Montenegro deployed to PM office
- Member of a network elected to be a Chair of Roma Committee in BiH
- Anna Lindh Award to partner from Montenegro

## Conclusion / Lessons Learned

Empowerment of Romani women / marginalized population group is a lengthy process

Systematic approach required

Romani women CSOs as agents of change

Working with Romani boys and men

Mainstreaming and building relationship with non- Romani organisations

Raise awareness and sensitivity of the majority population

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**Remarks by Gabriela Hrabáňová, Policy Coordinator,  
European Roma Grassroots Organizations Network (Belgium)**

Please, let me start by pointing out that Roma are extremely diverse, based on origin, language, religion, and occupation. Romani identity, as it is known in the present, began to take shape after the Romani departure from India. Roma have been a constituent element of Europe for over six centuries in which they have made all too-often overlooked human, material, artistic, economic, military and moral contribution. We, Roma people, live today throughout the world but mainly in Europe as the largest transnational minority; we are about 12 million in Europe. The majority (two-thirds) of the Romani population in Europe today lives in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, it is demographic factor that profoundly affects the social and political status of Romani communities as well the deep historical processes. In Western Europe, with the exception of Spain, the Roma have never constituted a significant proportion of the population, as they do in most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, moreover, while Roma in some countries are nomadic, most in Central and Eastern Europe have settled over time. The reality Roma faces is different, although similarly harsh as they are being encounter with the anti-Gypsyism on the daily basis.

The mobilization of the Roma in the wake of Central-Eastern Europe's transition towards democracy in 1989 released tensions between ethnic groups and triggered fresh waves of violent racism, as well as open and latent discrimination. It is important to mention that due to the full employment during the communism and the general state support, Roma became dependent on it in the form of various social benefits. Often based on the lack of financial illiteracy, Roma were the first who lost their job in the growing market economy. Romanies were often isolated in segregated

schools and classes for mentally handicap pupils that prevails until now. Moreover, the forced sterilization of Romani women during this time to the present saw several hundred cases of which have been documented in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and in other countries during Communism.

In early 90's process of creating specific provisions for and a general recognition of the Romani people started. Within this process, though much more later, a new social category of "Romani women" has emerged, which was a prerequisite to define Romani women's identity and social role.

As today, discrimination is a regular feature of the daily life of the Roma. General antipathy and exclusion from majority society is manifested in a lack of access to employment, housing, health care, and restriction from restaurants, sports facilities and other public spaces. Romani women have to face difficulties to an even greater extent than their male counterparts. Their situation is best described as multiple discrimination. They are women in a still largely male-dominated societies, members of an ethnic minority threatened by increasing violence from majority society, and also female members of the highly traditional Romani communities. The multiple discrimination is a sensitive, invisible and misunderstood issue. The endeavor of dealing with this phenomenon becomes even more challenging for a Romani woman, once she decides to become an activist. We believe, however, that it is of utmost importance to motivate Roma people in general, and Romani women in particular, to become involved in public life, learn new professional skills and build their self-confidence, if things are to change for the better. That is why Romani women have to study and understand their position, and be able to analyze it well.

Romani rights have been discussed at length for numerous years, but issues such as violence against Romani women, trafficking, and gender discrimination were always left on the back-burner. The situation changed with the initiation of dialogues between international human rights and multilateral organizations that played crucial role in the fostering commitments of governments toward the Roma inclusion. Lately, since the acceptance of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, EU is playing the strongest role in this process.

Although European Union defends inclusion, ongoing remedial efforts of the EU is limited to the volunteer coordination of Member States in four main policy areas - education, employment, housing and health. Their implementation thereof depends on the effective use of the European funding. Nevertheless the current EU funds (for the period 2007- 2013) proved its failure both in the terms of their administration and their targets. Romani organizations are not by large prepared for the abortion of the social funds due to their highly administrative and bureaucratic procedures. The current scheme strongly focuses on the delivering social services, social work as assistance to those in need. Only those organizations that follow the state policy are maintaining their existence. On contrary, those supporting the civic and political awareness, empowerment and fighting the discrimination at the first place are about to close down. In the same token most of the other donors active in the Roma social inclusion decided to withdraw from the EU or apply themselves for Structural Funds and European Funds due to the fact that the EU distributes enough money to make any other donor intervention almost insignificant at this moment.

According to many Romani experts, we will never achieve inclusion, focusing merely on the mentioned priorities; we have to take in consideration the fact of discrimination marginalization, segregation that needs to be overcome in order to ensure the fundamental rights and most of all Roma need to become an active citizens of their countries.

In practical terms, the challenge lies at the local level, besides overcoming the prejudices and stereotypes - in the Roma inclusion process, is the involvement of local stakeholders. Attempts of improving living conditions on the grassroots level of Roma will only succeed if Roma are participating as full citizens in equal stakeholdership.

There is still lack of understanding of the importance of the Romani women role in the wider society. Once a Roma woman has a higher level of education, she becomes a positive role model for members of her family, as well as for her community. Roma women are playing a crucial role as mediators between Roma and the institutions of the majority society, including schools. Romani

women are going outside the community to earn money, and to deal with the education of their children. With the aim to increase the education of women, international organizations are networking women's groups in order to motivate them to realize projects on a local level and build their capacity. The crucial roles in the process of emancipation and education are having community centers and women's groups. These are building a better environment for the Roma, and encouraging Romani women to become educated and active members of society, and to make a political lobby for their rights.

Therefore there should be available funding opportunities that will support local Romani women activists to create bottom-up pressure and to empower them to set up relations between Roma communities and local institutions. Roma on the local level, need to be provided expertise, skills and tools and with some basic financial resources. Especially now, when such a scheme doesn't exist neither at the national nor European level. But beyond training the approach should enlarge its scope of capacity building also to institutional and networking support.

The best is to illustrate the effect of the individual support is to present you my own story: First I have received Romani scholarship as high school student in 1995 and as such I joined Romani student's organization Athinganoi. We were about 30 youngsters from all of the Czech Republic! We supported each other, strengthened our Romani identity that often disappear while gaining education and we capacitated ourselves using coaching methods and supervision. I always inclined towards the politics, I went through a political leadership program, then organized several by my own as well as I was running twice for municipal election, unsuccessfully, but with a great impact on other young people, which was my biggest motivation as well as I was theirs. And because of my involvement in the civil society, and the understanding of the governmental policies, I was critical for new policies and was calling the government for the accountability. I was participating on several policy screenings and become part of the governmental experts group until I got an offer to join the Czech Governmental office responsible for the Roma inclusion. Soon I become its Director. Of course I did



not want to go there in the first time, but I understood that to be critical is not enough and we also need to take active part in the policy building. So I did and because of the circumstances I could have organized civil society in creating new updated concepts for Roma inclusion and I have ensured that the Roma were always part of all phases of the policy process, therefore we could have invested in the rebuilding memorial sites for the victims of Romani holocaust, moved the process leading to the acknowledgement of the unlawful sterilization of Romani women and made funding of NGOs reflected their needs in the field. Many of it would not be if there is no person understanding the sensitivity and urgency of dealing with the issues of Romani inclusion. And there would not be such a person without the support of international organizations that I have received in the past 10 years that made me ready for such a position.