

Roma Women Talk

Slovakia - Since 2001 – Ongoing

Discovery of Everyday Lives of Roma Women - My Way towards Roma Women Facing Poverty

Summary

Roma Women Talk is a project responding to the lack of information and knowledge about the problems of Roma women, about their life situation, their life values, their thinking on life, their view of Roma society, and their understanding of being Roma women. It pre-supposes that no inclusion or integration will be possible without emancipated Roma women, empowered to articulate their own perspective.

Roma Women Talk is a research initiative that aims to find out how Roma women think about themselves, their community and their society and what the future they see for themselves. It seeks to explore the specifics of Roma women's identities in relation to both ethnicity and gender and to establish points of concurrence with women facing poverty in the majority society. It serves to introduce Roma women living in various types of social environment and their fight against prejudice and discrimination by presenting their perspective and their life stories.

The achievements of Roma Women Talk include a research paper on "The Specifics of the Position of Roma Women in the Community – Changes over Time, Current Challenges", a publication of "Selected Interviews: Stories of Roma Women", interviews with Roma women broadcast and published in media and internet, and recommendations for organisations seeking to engage with Roma women.

A context of hostility and poverty compounded by gender inequality

The situation and experience of the Roma community in Slovakia is difficult. Many Roma people live in segregated settlements that do not meet the basic standards of life such as access to drinking water, sewage systems, electricity and heating. Most of them are unemployed and excluded from society. The view from the majority community is often hostile and this hostility has become more deeply entrenched in recent times. The high levels of unemployment rate, the low education levels and discrimination and societal hostility contribute to significant levels of poverty for Roma people.

The position of Roma women reflects an intersection of double disadvantage, gender and ethnicity. In the wider society, they experience the same hostility and discrimination coupled with the inequalities experienced by all women. Within the Roma community, the role of women reflects gender stereotypes, particularly within the family. This can vary with the level of exclusion experienced by the community, whether the community has been segregated, separated, dispersed or assimilated. The inequalities Roma women experience within their communities can be exacerbated by the social exclusion and depth of deprivation of the community. It can be deepened by damage done to the social structure of the community through forced migration and family disruption, particularly during socialist times. Inter-generational poverty and unemployment creates further burdens for Roma women.¹

¹ <http://www.mecem.sk/15383/postavenie-romskych-zien-v-spolocnosti-v-slovensko>

In: Postavenie rómskych žien v spoločnosti V. – Slovensko, Angela Genova, Emilio Burgos, Kristína Magdolenova, Mihaela GheorgheRosel Riviera, 23.11.2015

The challenge to engage Roma women

There is a clear and unmet challenge in relation to engaging Roma women. There have been worthy predecessors to this project, but there is an absence of long-term results in improving the situation and experience of Roma women. Projects focused on achieving long-term results are missing due to the lack of secure ongoing financial support.

In 2001 an initiative focused on providing basic education for Roma women with a view to securing possible future work in municipalities. The main goal was to activate Roma women at local level. The initiative was funded with Phare Funds. It was the first serious attempt to engage with Roma women and it stimulated interest in and further action on their issues. A later initiative was financed by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The main purpose of this initiative was to educate Roma women in order to enable them to participate in politics at the local level.

One early activity, which deserves special mention, was the civic association EccE which was founded in 1999 to monitor information about Roma and co-operate with media. This was an information centre for mass media, where journalists could verify information related to Roma issues. This initiative was followed by the creation of the Roma Press Agency (RPA) which focused on the education and training of young Roma for future positions in media.

The Roma Press Agency implemented many initiatives in education and training in the field of media communication for young Roma people. These contributed to valuable results of media outputs in terms of movies, portraits of women, and interviews. These outputs provided a new know-how for Roma and about the Roma. The agency also organised training for municipalities on work with the Roma, issued books and newspapers, produced movies and broadcast 'Roma National Magazine' on Slovak Television (Slovak public TV). Broadcasting on Slovak Television became the most important activity of the Agency from 2006. This led to a change in the organisation's name to Roma Media Centre (MECEM) in 2008.

Roma Women Talk has emerged from this activity out of a sense of urgency to address the lack of information and knowledge about the real problems of Roma women, about their life situation, their life values, their thinking on life, their view of Roma society, and their understanding of being Roma women. Without this knowledge engagement of Roma women would not happen or would happen on a false premise. Without this engagement, Roma women would not secure the resources to move from situations of gender inequality, anti-Roma hostility, and poverty.

To be authentic, let Roma women talk

The project Roma Women Talk sought another way to engage with Roma women. Roma women were engaged in narrating their life stories. The idea is to build on this narration and to shift the question further and assist Roma women overcome their problems and be more successful in living a life they have reason to value.

In 2014 a research initiative focused on exploring the position of Roma women in society was started out of an awareness of the lack of information on Roma women's views of life, society and themselves in this wider context. Co-operation with the civic association Res Publica and an association with the Faculty of Arts of Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice enabled this research. This allowed for interviews with Roma women with a high research value and with a greater potential to be more effective in assisting long-term targets to be set and worked towards.

The research work has taken place in particular regions within Slovakia where there is a concentration of Roma and where an in-depth articulation of Roma women's perspectives is possible in interviews. These are the regions of Banská Bystrica and of Košice, both located in eastern Slovakia. These are pilot interviews which will serve to define the research base and create the conditions for a deeper and qualitative research to follow.

The aims of this work are to:

- Find out how Roma women think about themselves and society, establish their views on their community and their own issues, explore their opinion about the future for their community, and examine how they think about the poverty they experience, the prejudice and discrimination towards Roma women, and their views of Roma and non-Roma relationships
- Explore the specifics of Roma women's identities in relation to both ethnicity and gender
- Establish points of concurrence with women facing poverty in the majority society and how any concurrence might be a basis for inclusive programmes
- Introduce Roma women living in various types of social environment and their fight against prejudice and discrimination by presenting their perspective and their life stories.

The first steps in the project were taken in early 2015. This involved a process of verification of the methodology. A number of semi-structured interviews were carried out with Roma women. Some of these interviews were published. Between February 2015 and May 2016, interviews were carried out with Roma women in the Košice and Prešov regions. The interviews were transcribed and analysed to establish early results. In the second half of 2016 the full results will be elaborated and comparisons will be made with data gathered on women in the majority society. Following this there will be a full publication and dissemination of outputs. Due to the self-financing nature of the project, without any external resources, it is not possible to designate a strict schedule for these. However, research staff estimates that this will happen by the end of 2016.

Building the picture to enable engagement

The mutual respect and recognition inherent in giving voice to Roma women is central to the success of the project. The research approach is further making it possible to impact on stakeholders with responsibility to act on Roma issues and on gender issues related to the Roma community. The picture developed in the outputs to date has already contributed to such outcomes. These include:

- Research paper on: "The Specifics of the Position of Roma Women in the Community – Changes over Time, Current Challenges"
- Publication: "Selected Interviews: Stories of Roma Women"
- Interviews with Roma women broadcast and published in media and internet
- Recommendations made for organisations seeking to engage with Roma women.

The main threat to sustainability of the project is financing. This is compensated for by the strong commitment of the project co-ordinator and the project team. The project co-ordinator has been using private financial resources to continue implementation of this project.

This project is only the start of very long journey to articulate the everyday life of Roma women without prejudice, to recount their everyday struggles and fears from their own perspective, and to establish their issues of poverty, violence within the family, and lack of education in their own terms. The picture that emerges is also one of positive examples and successful stories of those who were able to overcome the barriers and the traditional scepticism that Roma cannot engage with mainstream society and be successful.

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Further information

Roma Media Centre: www.mecem.sk

Roma Media Centre Facebook: <https://sk-sk.facebook.com/mecem.sk>

Slovak Gov. Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities: www.minv.sk/?romske-komunity-uvod

Res Publica civic association: www.respublica.szm.com/index.html

Res Publica Facebook: <https://sk-sk.facebook.com/Res-Publica-OZ-146650365390439/>