

# GRASS ROOTS WORK

- A model of civic engagement for Roma Women -

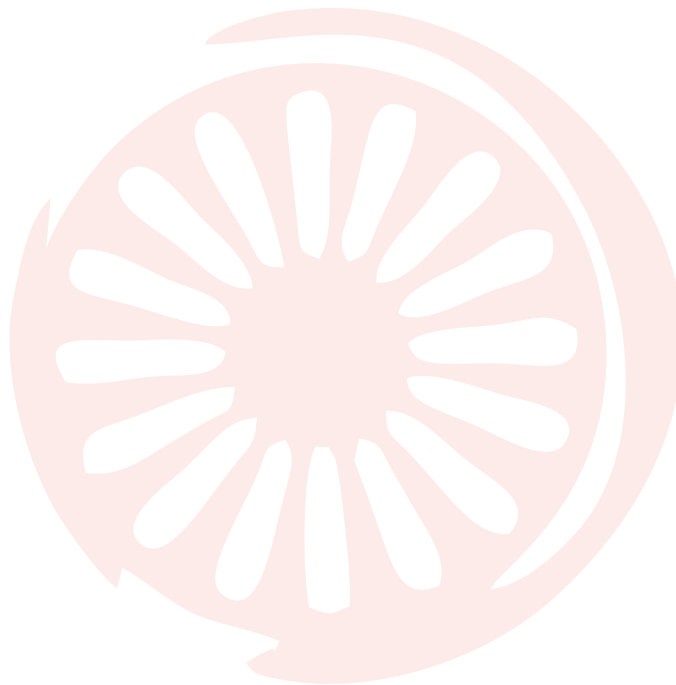


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**E-Romnja**

(The Association for the Promotion of Roma Women's Rights)



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## I. E-ROMNJA - OVERVIEW

**E-Romnja** (The Association for the Promotion of Roma Women's Rights) is a non-profit organization founded in 2012 by a group of activists of Roma and non-Roma background.

The mission behind E-Romnja is to fight for the affirmation, promotion, and the growth of civic engagement and activity among Roma women in the social and community. Through the activities which we organize through grass roots work, we fight to make the voices of Roma women heard on local and both national levels, so that taking into account their needs will become part of the political agenda.

**E-Romnja** fights for the respect, integrity, and dignity of Roma women. We want the image of Roma women to reflect diversity and the reality of their experiences. Throughout time, negative portrayals of the Roma people that circulated through mass-media, literature, and even through the arts, had a major impact on the life of Roma women, determining their lack of access to resources, leaving them invisible and marginalized. We believe that our voices, the voices of Roma women, need to be heard due to historical injustices against Roma women (slavery, the Holocaust, and the communist era), but also because of the historic subordination of Roma women within the ethnic community, as well as in Romanian society. All of these reasons determined the invisibility of Roma women, bearing influence on the politics and programs adopted to better their situation. That is why we consider that it is important that the issues of Roma women be present on local and national public agendas, as a first step towards the affirmation of their rights.

In this sense, our intervention focuses on both a local level, in Roma communities, in order to help with the development and support the initiative groups of Roma women, as well as on a national level, through the development of dialogue with feminist organizations, Roma organizations, and public institutions.

On the local level, in six years of work, we managed to organize seven initiative groups formed of Roma and non-Roma women in Roma communities, of different social categories and three Roma youth initiative groups in Mizil, Giurgiu, and Valea Seacă.



We assume that by working with women we contribute to the progress in their communities, ensuring an educational level that will be passed from mother to child. The work method used is adopted to fit the model of community development, its central activities focusing on Roma women. Thereby, we organize and support local initiative groups formed of



Roma women, with which we organize acts of mobilization and civic engagement, cultural events, to increase the women's access to healthcare, education, housing, to raise awareness of issues relating to gender equality, reproductive rights, domestic violence, and also activities that cater to the youth. In the last few years, through our public activities, we engaged over 700 Roma women within the five communities.

Our priorities according to our strategy: combating violence against women, access to reproductive and sexual rights, and the engagement of Roma women at a local and national level. Thereby, we approach problems which have to do with gender equality, the civic engagement of women at local and national levels, sexual and reproductive rights, the access to healthcare for Roma women, while fighting at the same time against inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and against racism found in the work space, social services, education, and court system.

However, we often operate intersectionally. The concept of intersectionality has become a part of our work as we recognize that we as Roma women do not have a unilateral identity, but rather are a culmination of multiple backgrounds which determines our different experiences. We also believe that the problems of Roma women can be correlated with any issue that affects the life of women, from infrastructure, forced evictions, identity documents to the phenomenon of violence, sexual harassment, and of reproductive rights. However, because our resources often keep us from addressing all intersectional issues, we developed informal alliances with different coalitions, networks, NGO's, and activists, so that we stand in solidarity and contribute to different intersectional causes.

## The E-Romnja Team



## II. INTRODUCTION - WORKING IN COMMUNITIES OF ROMA WOMEN

This brochure was conceived six years ago, presenting **E-Romnja's** work to empower Roma women on a local level. Our model is adapted after a communitarian development model, but uses a feminist approach in working with the Roma women. We believe that this brochure can be useful for women and Roma organizations, as well as for informal groups.

Our brochure is not only a way to communicate, but also an instrument of work through which we want to popularize the feminist model of grass roots work. Despite the obstacles that both the Roma women in the communities and we as Roma feminist activists face, we believe that there are local models of intervention, however this needs to be implemented, preserving the work ethic with the people and being sure that their perspective is integrated.

In the table of contents of this brochure one will find information on the combined methods we utilize in the communities we work with, information about the formation of initiative groups, as well as two case studies of two communities with which we have worked with for over three years. All the communities with which we work with have in common a factor: that they are placed in the city or village's periphery, demographically populated mostly by people of Roma ethnicity, and access to services and utilities is made hard by defect infrastructure, geographic segregation, and institutional racism. All of these combined with the lack of dialogue and collaboration between the local authorities and the communities, determines



that the people of these places live in absolute poverty, outside of the services system, and thus without opportunities in regards to financial, public, cultural, and social spheres of life. Aside from all of this, the problems of Roma women of the communities are usually placed last on the scale of the communities' priorities. That does not mean that they do exist, but that many times problems regarding unemployment, access to services, utilities, and infrastructure makes the women's problems invisible.



Therefore, being aware of the constraints and obstacles Roma women in the communities we work with face, we developed an approach focused on the needs of the Roma women, as well as those of the community, to ensure that the women's voices are heard without ignoring the rest of the community's problems, but approaching them holistically, putting emphasis on their own experiences. It is not an invented method, but an adapted in such a way that it can respond to the needs and interests of the groups we interact and work with.

As we have said, in our activities that span the local level we use instruments for community development that are adapted to local context. We guide our activity based on four principles called S.O.R.A. (an abbreviation that means "sister")

## **S.O.R.A**

### **Feminist Intervention Model in Roma Communities**

This intervention model has as a basis four principles/steps after which we guide our activities:

**Study** – identifying the needs of the community, analyzing, learning about the experiences of the women, and raising awareness of them (experiences of inequality, abuses, violence, etc.)

**Organization** – helping the community develop starting from the Roma women's initiative, encouraging communitarian, feminine leadership, developing local strategies for the changing the common mentality towards the role of women in the community.

**Revendication** – positioning and affirming confrontational methods in public space, of monitorization of the activities of the local authorities, but also of identification/defining of the Roma women's own interests.

**Advocacy** – implicating local actors from different backgrounds for efficientizing politics (local budgets and programs, etc.), starting from acts led by Roma women.





We believe that this model is feminist for the following reasons:

- its starting point focuses on the experiences of Roma women;
- uses the feminist approach focuses on the experiences of the women without speaking for them, but to be there for them in order to create a platform where their voices can be heard
- contests the power relation between women and men, as well as the relation between institutions and women, or women from different classes/ ethnicities/ religions;
- the fight against inequalities (between women and men, etc);
- brings in discussion problems specific to Roma women
- and last but not least, problematizes the problems specific to women, in as far as “any problem seen through the eyes of women is a problem for women”

For example, infrastructure is a problem concerning women so long as they hold responsibility for when the streets are filled with mud and must clean after all family members, to wash their clothes, and to take care of the home.

### III. EMPOWERMENT OF ROMA WOMEN THROUGH GRASS ROOTS WORK

The idea of forming the initiative groups was conceived due to the need to bring first-hand experiences from everyday life of members through grass roots work and to transpose them in national and local politics.

For the formation of the groups we needed the completion of a few steps, such as: choosing which communities to focus on, visiting each community to understand its specificity, the adaptation of the discourse relating to the problems faced, identifying human resources which would facilitate certain activities, and the formation of the groups and the consolidation of them.

Sharing the responsibilities, leading certain activities, positioning on certain subjects, but also the valuing of individual abilities are central in the work that leads to the consolidation of the groups and the empowerment of the women.

The empowerment of the women derives from activities of encouragement, support, promotion, and solidarity. We wish to empower women from the initiative groups in order to combat the systems of



subordination of women in their communities and in society in the long term, those being: the patriarchy, classism, and discrimination based on ethnicity.

Through group activities such as workshops based on issues proposed by the women, cooking sessions, and campaigns, we strive to create safe spaces in which women can express themselves.

On the other hand, our public acts such as marches, protests, participation at local council meetings, petitions, and flash mobs, have represented moments of revendication, of solidarities or consolidations of the relationships with local authorities.

Another goal of our grass roots work is that to create more solidarity among women in the communities we work with. Activities that focus on themes such as violence against women or reproductive rights aim to create a better understanding of the experiences of the women without judgment, and to understand when there is a need for solidarity and intervention.

Through collaboration and the openness of the women in the initiative groups, we strive to facilitate access to social services for Roma women, their engagement in the process of initiating acts of advocacy and making decisions in the local context.

So the women of the community can understand the diversity in the way discrimination has impacted groups in society, we undertook topics that are still considered taboo in the communities, such as the LGBTQ community, forced marriages, marital rape, etc.



## IV. CASE STUDIES: MIZIL AND VALEA SEACĂ COMMUNITIES

### a. Case Study: Mizil

Mizil is a city with a population under 15,000 people, situated between Ploiești and Buzău. The city is divided in many areas which are predominantly populated by Roma people, such as: Dalas, Fefelei, Poteraș și Cartier. "Cartier" is the community in which we started to work with five years ago.

The community is situated in the western part of the city, far away from the center of the city and outside of foreign investors' view. The community numbers at about 1,500 – 2,000 Romani speakers, most identifying as belonging to the "Ursari" group.

Clothing is diversified and changes from generation to generation, however the skirt and the shawl are still worn, especially by married women. There are various designs of these clothing pieces. The apron still being worn by elderly women.

Half of the community has converted to Pentecostalism. Part of the community travels around countries such as Germany, England, France, Italy, and Spain. Those who stay in Cartier work in different fields of commerce such as the sale of fruits and vegetables, some collect iron and scrap metal, or have their own groceries. Depending on the season, most work on the nearby farms during the days, or hired by a sanitation firm.

There are three primary schools and two high schools in Mizil. Approximately 90% of the children of the Cartier community go to the same school in the city, that which is closest to the neighborhood.

There are young people who go on to attend high school, and the number of those who do has grown in past years, it has not made significant impact on the community. There are also Roma children and youth who live closer to the city center and attend schools at other primary schools and high schools.

In between the neighborhood and the rest of the city, there is a great difference in infrastructure, in the sense that in the new part of Cartier, there is no sewage system, no paved roads and sidewalks, and no street lighting. The Roma people of Mizil live in compact communities in neighborhoods that face these problems.

For the people of the community, access to city hall and services is not very easy and distance between the neighborhood and the local authorities becomes a factor, as well as the little tolerance and openness the authorities have towards the Roma community.

The Initiative Group of the Roma Women of Mizil has its roots in the summer of 2013, and initially formed of eight members. The dynamic of the group has changed in time due to the freedom of movement for labor within Europe, however, currently the group counts fifteen active members.

There are also periods of the year when the engagement of women is higher/lower than usual, depending on the activities and the times when they do seasonal labor, when they observe legal/religious holidays, coupled with the multitude of responsibilities that women need to fulfill.

At first, the problems identified by the group were tied to infrastructure, stray dogs, and access to education. A problem that was prioritized was that of infrastructure, on which we focused all our efforts. We started through work meetings, from which they started an advocacy campaign to convince the authorities to rehabilitate the infrastructure in Cartier. We then started a campaign, Photovoice, in which the women were directly involved, taking photos that showed the reality of the problems that exist due to lack of infrastructure.

Their works were exhibited at a public meeting which we organized at the technological gymnasium "Tase Dumitrescu" in Mizil. Participants of

this meeting including representatives of the local authorities and members of the Roma community.

In 2014, we celebrated April 8<sup>th</sup>, International Romani Day for the first time. Up until then, the members of the respective of community were unaware of the existence of an international day for the Roma people. We celebrated the date at the Saint Nicolae School in Mizil, where more than 90% of pupils are Roma children from the neighborhood. We shared flyers with information about International Romani Day, we sang the Romani anthem, and the children in school prepared a special activity. The women in the initiative group cooked pastries which they served to the pupils and their teacher, which organized cultural activities.



In 2015, after almost two years of participation and presentations from the women in the initiative groups in the local council, along with petitions and local actions for better infrastructure, the local administration introduced the pavement and rehabilitation of fifteen streets in Cartier in its agenda.

This small success achieved by the women of the group with the support of E-Romnja, symbolized an opening between the community and the authorities, but also for the ones implicated in the process.

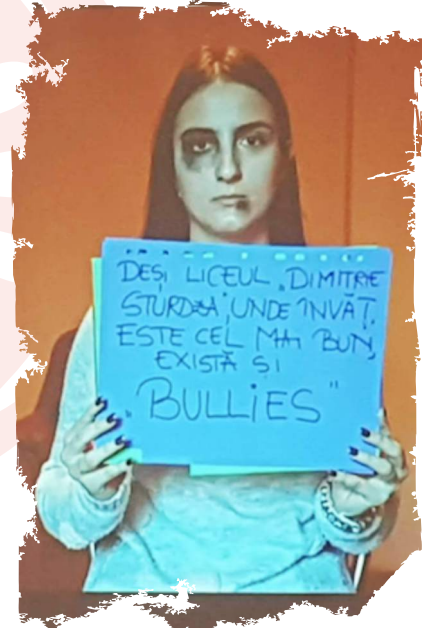
Our initiatives in the Cartier community were often cumbersome, facing the obstacle that as the reticent attitude of the authorities to the solutions we proposed. An example of such was the campaign for testing "Babes Papa Nicolau", where doctors refused to offer free testing to the Roma women of Cartier.

In 2013, the Romanian government initiated a national campaign that allowed free testing for cervical cancer for women. This campaign was addressed to women regardless of their employment status, however doctors refused to set appointments with the women on the basis that they were unemployed.

After two months of local tensions and a series of letters sent to the DSP Prahova and the Ministry of Health, approximately fifty women received free testing appointments at a clinic in Bucharest, since there is no clinic in

Mizil that assesses testing for cervical cancer.

Following this initiative, a clinic that offers the "Papa Nicolau" test opened up in Mizil approximately a year later.





Currently, the initiative group of Roma women continues with monitoring the activity of the city hall and local council in Mizil.

Last year in August, the initiative group sent out a petition, which they also advocated for in meeting with the local council, which called for a center for women where they can carry out activities and discussions on different issues that are of interest for the women in the community.

In the last few years, the Initiative Group of the Women in Mizil carried out a series of activities which have engaged members of the community as well as representatives of the local authorities.

The result of this was a betterment of the relationship with the local administration, but also the relationships within the group.

The small victories won, the constant presence in the community, and the initiatives addressed to the community, as well as to the authorities, have made the group to become more aware of the power of organized community.



## b. Case Study: Valea Seacă

The Valea Seacă commune is situated in eastern Romania, in the western part of the Moldavian Plateau. It is northwest of the Iași county, 90 km from the city of Iași, and circa 10 km from the city of Pașcani.

Its population is of 3561 people, 1600 of which are sunt Ursari Roma, speakers of both the Romanian and Romani languages. A majority of the women in this community do not work with legal documents, doing mostly domestic work, while men seasonally work as day laborers.

In the last years, a phenomenon that is present in this area, both among Romanian and Roma populations, is the mobility of labor throughout Europe. Among the most frequented countries are Finland, Sweden, and Norway.

We started working with this community in 2015, along with our colleagues from the Filia Center. Together we combined the working method of advocacy with methods of community development, such as the development and formation of initiative groups.

A first step we made before beginning work with the community was to approach the authorities and to find human resources available to focus on subjects like the empowerment of Roma women.



The specificity of the project that we implemented was from the very beginning focused on fighting domestic violence against Roma and non-Roma women. It was a topic that was extremely difficult, which we first tried to bring into discussion in a formal framework.

At first, participation was timid, given the nature of the subject. At the first few meetings, five to six women participated, and their participation was in a sense impersonal, the problems they were speaking of were never their own, and they were always focused on someone who they had heard of, who had suffered abuse. Therefore, we started to build the initiative group which could propose different topics of discussion, identify the most important problems that women face, and find the best-fitting solutions together.

The Valea Seacă commune is a paradox of contradictions. Here, one finds all social classes of Roma and non-Roma people: wealthy people, people living in poverty, as well as a kind of middle class. Of course, every social class has its specific problems and to better respond to the various needs of the women, but also to facilitate their participation at meetings, we decided together with the women to form three initiative groups in the areas that have significant populations of Roma women. Thus, currently, in this commune there are three initiative groups in Pălămida, Cucova, and Valea Seacă. In the three years of activity, each group has organically mapped which direction it would like to take its initiatives towards, as will be specified further.

The group in Pălămida confronts itself with extreme poverty in comparison with the rest of the community, and the initiatives that take place here are of social/charitable nature. Taking into account the specificity of the group, the activities taking place addressed both the empowerment of women and civic engagement. Together with the women in the other groups,

the group in Pălămida organized activities in the street, such as: participating in the "Together for the Safety of Women" March, taking place on a local level in 2016 and 2017, a march commemorating the victims of the Holocaust; or the solidarization with the the event of April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Together with representatives of each initiative group, meetings with the mayor were also organized to spread awareness of the different problems with which the women confront themselves with: difficulties encountered in accessing social services, the solicitation of powder milk for low-income mothers, the sanitation of the creek, and the removal of stray dogs in the community, and a petition against the abuses which the post makes when delivering social benefits.



The Valea Seacă group “de la centru”, is a group which was consolidated due to the women in this area having a different role in the community, and thus, the problems they face are different, and are more focused on the integration of the children in school.

With this direction mapped by themselves, E-Romnja organized different workshops in schools for discussing the phenomenon of bullying with children. In this case as well, the dynamic of the group owing to the diversity among them coupled with their wish to speak about their experiences related to violence, determined us to change our approach.

To formalize and consolidate the group, together with our colleagues from the Filia Center, we decided to mix the groups together, inviting women from the other two initiative groups of Pălămida and Cucova, to develop a common initiative that focused on the topic of violence. This idea proved to be useful, and the women proposed the reactivation of the groups for local action on the topic of bullying in school, but also on the discussions about awareness on rights they have to escape an abusive relationship.

Therefore, in September 2017, we organized a public meeting at school, where women, as well as men, in the community, teachers of the school, representatives of city hall, and also of the police, and the women of the group spoke publicly of the experiences of violence which they go through. Since then, the group of women has expanded and the group usually numbers at around sixteen to twenty participants at meetings.

The group functions organically and expanded thanks to the women who always bring new people to the group, and communicate with each other when the facilitator organizes the meetings.

Usually, the women rotate their homes as meeting points, and when there are important actions, we solicitate the council room at city hall, or a classroom. Among the problems that women face when getting involved with community activities is the lack of a care center for their children. That is why at our meetings, they play the “active role” during our discussions.



The group in Cucova is very diverse. The demographic contains both youth and elderly Roma women, speakers and non-speakers of the Romani language, poor women and women with steady financial situations. Even from the start of the formation of this group, the topics of interest were sexual and reproductive rights.

These discussions were initiated by the women, due to their experiences as young mothers who needed information on child care, about contraception, and about problems with their health. These meetings laid the foundation of a campaign that referenced reproductive health, organized together with a midwife and in partnership with the Public Health Department of Bacău.

Grass roots work is not easy, especially if a group is formed of people with different backgrounds and vulnerabilities. "In the field", one finds challenges and dangers at every step, some being foreseeable, and some not. These can vary from dangers related to stray dogs to tensions between local leaders or local authorities which can lead to distrust in people and make work in the community harder.

When one fights with a system that is entirely dysfunctional, and the responsibility of the person in the field is to make the empowerment of Roma women possible, in our case, Roma women who during that day may have not eaten anything, it is inevitable to be caught in a whirlwind of sentiments like those of cynism, empathy, helplessness, and frustration.

For a real change to happen in communities, not just using a ticking off an activity in the framework of a project, the worker that is in the field has an extremely important role. It is necessary, that they work continuously, responsibly, devotedely, but also strategically, with small goals that are achievable.





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