FEMINIST COMMUNITY INTERVENTION

- Scaling the S.O.R.A. method -

Table of content:

ABOUS US:

E-Romnja is a **Roma feminist organization** whose mission is to fight for affirming, promoting and increasing the involvement of Roma girls and women both in society and within the Roma community. We want the public perception of Roma girls and women to reflect the diversity and reality of our experiences.

At the national level, we act intersectionally through networks, coalitions, and the work of civil society groups to build and contribute to a better public agenda regarding specific issues Roma women face. Thus, we participate in counseling processes, trainings, and public forums on themes/projects/policies related to housing and forced evictions, forms of violence against women, gender equality, the LGBTQIA+ community, etc. The advocacy activity is an integral part of our approach to ensure that the work, experiences, and problems encountered by Roma girls and women in the communities are reflected at the policy level, in the public speech, and at the level of civil society's initiatives.

Any issue seen through the eyes of Roma women is a feminist issue!

WHAT IS S.O.R.A.?

- The S.O.R.A.[1] method reunites a series of **instruments** used in community development work and utilized by numerous non-governmental organizations globally.
- The **E-Romnja Association** published the method **for the first time in 2016, after approximately three years of implementation in several communities we worked with.**
- The S.O.R.A. method was developed **with Roma girls and women** from the communities where E-Romnja works.

Since 2012 and up to now, the S.O.R.A. method has been implemented in Roma communities in:
- Mizil
- Spanțov (Călărași County)
- Mărginenii de Jos (Prahova County)
- Giurgiu
- Valea Seacă (Bacău County)
- Ghețu Anghel (Bucharest)
- Bahna (Neamț County)
- Breasta (Dolj County)
- Chitila, Giulești, and Străulești in District 1 of Bucharest

Throughout time, other communities or organizations we collaborate with have taken over or been inspired by the S.O.R.A. method, adapting it to their work.

1   S.O.R.A. is an acronym for sister in the Romanian language.
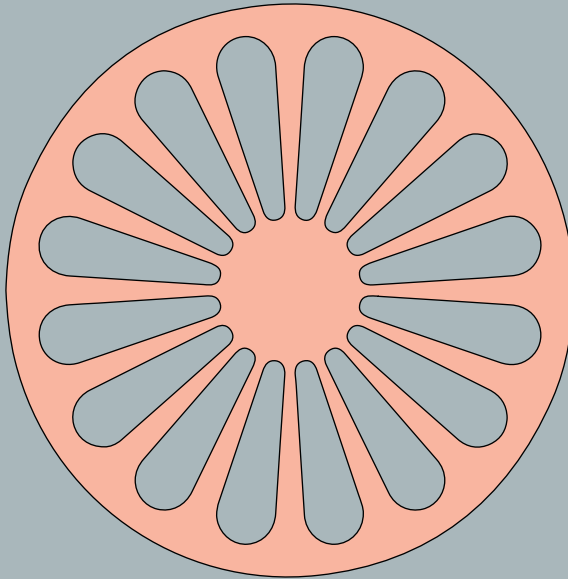
In 2023, we formally started the scaling process with the **Stea Association** in Satu Mare. Through this intervention, the **Stea** team aimed to replicate the working model we developed to prevent school dropout and forced marriage. At the end of the initiative, the organization in Satu Mare involved nine local public institutions to work on these topics.

In 2024, the process expanded in Apața commune in Brașov County through collaboration with the **Aici pentru Tine Association**, which established a local initiative group consisting of women in the community, following each step of the method.

SCALING THE S.O.R.A. METHOD:

- Numerous international reports have signaled the **failure of Roma social inclusion**, since Roma people, or people from different vulnerable categories, **were not involved in the process**.

- We believe that through this working method, we contribute to changing the paradigm of implementing projects for Roma without their involvement, **creating premises so that our needs and interests define the projects and not vice-versa**. Most often, the people we work with are seen only as beneficiaries or target group. The S.O.R.A. method proposes **the women's involvement in all the processes**: facilitation, project writing, implementation, and representation.
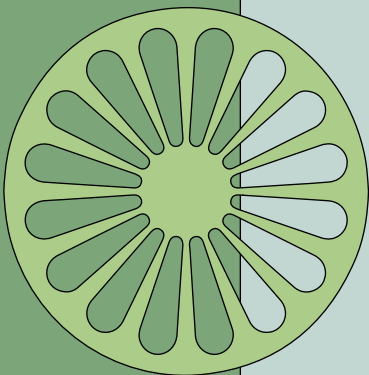
For us, the scaling process of the S.O.R.A. method means:

- improving the way of working in the communities with groups of Roma girls and women, people from LGBTQ+ community or other marginalized categories, historically excluded from different political spheres or decisions at the local level;

- the fair redistribution of local resources so that communities can equitably benefit from them;

- the existence of certain services to support Roma, non-Roma women, or other groups.

Scaling is a customized process, adapted to local contexts, the needs of groups, categories, and communities with which one wishes to work, but which follows several work steps, as well as a working process.

CENTRUL COMUNITAR
"BIROUL FEMEILOR"
cu sprijinul Primăriei Comunei Valea Seacă, Bacău

WHO CAN IMPLEMENT THE S.O.R.A. METHOD?

- Any non-governmental organization working with people/groups of people belonging to vulnerable or historically excluded and discriminated categories;
- Any **informal** group or collective working with people/groups belonging to vulnerable or historically excluded and discriminated categories.

WHY TO APPLY THE S.O.R.A. METHOD?

- Because the method **ensures social impact** and creates l**ong-term systemic changes**;
- Because **social inclusion cannot be accomplished without the people directly affected** by different forms of social/ethnic/racial/gender injustice;
- Because the method creates the foundations for the **representation/participation and visibility** of people with different vulnerabilities;
- Because the method produces **epistemic knowledge**;
- Because the method **operationalizes the concept of intersectionality**;
- Because the method **ensures the necessary ethical fiber in all social inclusion projects**;
- Because the method has a *top-down approach*, **meaning that in all the stages and processes, the voices and needs of women in communities are reflected and integrated**.
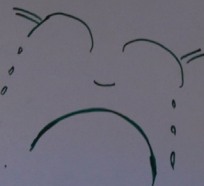
- **S.O.R.A. is not a method for having immediate 'success'.**

- **S.O.R.A. is about mutual learning between the organization/collective and the people with whom and for whom we work.**

- **S.O.R.A. does not save people but supports a process we are part of, being aware of our privileged positions, which we can use for the benefit of others.**

- **S.O.R.A. is a dynamic process and a method that can be adapted when needed.**
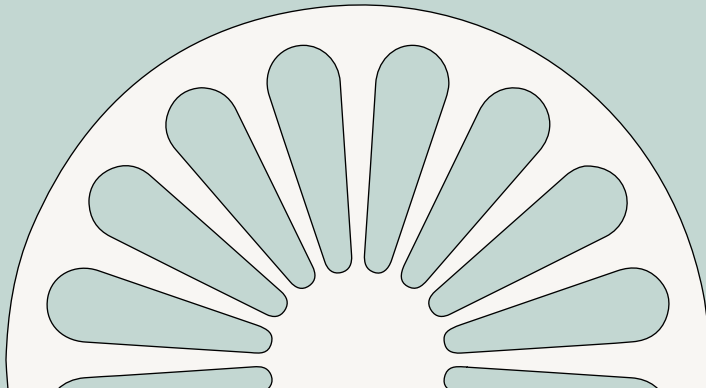
WORKING STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE S.O.R.A. METHOD:

Study: is a stage of **analysis, learning, and sharing the experiences of women** (inequalities, abuses, violence, etc.) in which we **identify** the needs of the community;

Organization: in this stage, **we develop local initiative groups of Roma women**. It is the moment when we organize workshops, discussions, and meetings through which we **prioritize** the community's issues and **develop** tailored strategies. This stage encourages Roma female leadership and promotes models of Roma women's involvement in the community;

Revendication: this is a stage in which the **groups** we work with **organize various public, community, and local actions to address different issues**. The women from the local initiative groups begin to monitor the local administration's activity and different local politicians, but also the local projects which should include their communities. Furthermore, the Roma women start to participate in public council meetings.

Advocacy: this is the final stage in which we **create contexts for dialogue and collaboration** with **local actors from various structures, starting from actions built by Roma women**. We organize advocacy actions for different local issues faced by women, from the lack of local infrastructure, lack of access to water, services, and utilities to the lack of access to health, lack of gender-based violence services, etc.

THEMES THAT CAN BE ADDRESSED:

- Infrastructure: usable roads, public transportation, playgrounds for children;
- Access to utilities: sewage, water, gas, street lighting;
- Access to sexual and reproductive health services, social assistance and benefits, access to education, access to gender-based violence services;
- Decent housing and forced evictions;
- Civil, political and cultural rights;
- Access to public institutions;
- Access to Roma culture in schools and cultural institutions;
- Community organization and community development.

Examples of activities that could be organized:

- Workshops organized with and about the Roma girls' and/or women's interests;
- Petitions on themes identified at the local level;
- Mother-daughter cooking actions/contests;
- Photo-voice to talk about community/women's issues;
- Forum theater as a form to explore specific problems of interest;
- Street actions: flash-mob, protest marches, commemorative demonstrations, etc.;
- Exchange visits between different groups/collectives/women in communities;
- Medical caravans;
- Monitoring local council meetings.

CONDITIONS FOR THE S.O.R.A. METHOD IMPLEMENTATION:

- **Openness and availability for** organizational/collective **change**;
- **Transparency in decision-making;**
- **Willingness to learn about and from the people for whom projects are developed;**
- **Hiring and including in teams the people for whom projects are being developed;**
- **Involving the people from the categories with whom we work in decision-making;**
- **Adopting certain standards of work and language for the people from the categories with whom we work;**
- **Eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy** to give access to the people from the categories with whom we work;
- **Operating with the correct terms that describe with accuracy the experiences of people** from the categories with whom we work, such as: racism, sexism, classism, colorism, homophobia, etc.;
- **Work continuity**, beyond projects, with people from the categories **with whom we work**;
- **Validating** the work of other local NGOs and **creating alliances** to support people from the categories they work with;
- **Getting out of the comfort zone and self-questioning;**
- **Consistency in fieldwork and regular meetings with local initiative groups**.

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY CHANGES:

Sustainable community change cannot be achieved through a superficial approach or by checking off some activities. Long-term engagement, done ethically and using a working method, is essential to produce impact.

It is paramount that the projects and initiatives aimed to support Roma women and other categories of people from different groups be built based on their real needs and their involvement. The Roma women and other categories whom we work with should not only be the beneficiaries of such programs, but also be actively involved in identifying solutions, in decision-making process, and voicing their own needs.

Empowering Roma women and other groups we work with is a process involving understanding, support, and collaboration. It requires a dedicated, continuous, and strategic involvement, with clear and achievable objectives that actively includes the participation of the community throughout the process. It is important to be aware that, when working with vulnerable communities or groups, **poverty, racism, patriarchy, and other oppressive systems are factors that hinder or most often block the process of change**. This is why it is essential to have an **integral and intersectional approach** and, furthermore, **to have institutional support from local or central authorities.**

At the same time, let us not forget that the role of NGOs must be of a **watchdog, monitoring** how the system complies with human rights and, especially, the rights of the most disadvantaged people or groups. The non-governmental organizations **must not substitute** the role of the state.

Last but not least, it is fundamental to call racism, sexism, classicism, and other forms of discrimination as it is when the people we work with go through these experiences. **Using other terms minimizes** people's experiences and does not create the grounds for a collaboration based on **trust** and **mutual respect** for their lived experiences. Change is an arduous and long-term process, which is exactly why **continuity** is the 'recipe' for gradual progress and social transformation.

Bibliography:

- FRA, EU Funds: Ensuring compliance with fundamental rights (2023) https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/eu-funds
- Council of Europe, Recommandation on Roma Equity, inclusion and participation (2021/C93/01): https://www.europeansources.info/record/proposal-for-a-council-recommendation-on-roma-equality-inclusion-and-participation/
- ERGO Network, Ineffectiveness or misuse of EU funds (2020) https://ergonetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Misuse-of-EU-funds-in-4-Member-States-synthesis-report.pdf
- FRA, EU Funds: Ensuring compliance with fundamental rights (2023) https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/eu-funds
- Rizwan Tayabali, PATRI Framework for Scaling Social Impact, https://www.inclusivebusiness.net/sites/default/files/wp/PATRI-Framework.pdf
- Tatiana Fraser, The art of Scaling Deep (2023): https://ashokacanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/The-Art-of-Scaling-Deep-2023.pdf

Any issue seen through the eyes of Roma women is a feminist issue!