



Roma Women's Empowerment Learning Trajectory

1. Rationale:

Women's empowerment is a central aspect of sustainable community development, yet SDC Roma inclusion programming in Central Eastern Europe does not have an explicit specialization or focus on women or gender. Gender is seen as a transversal theme across some programmes, except in new member states, where the bilateral agreements that have been negotiated have not prioritized a gender component. Without a programmatic focus on women's empowerment, there is a risk of working in an instrumental rather than strategic way with Roma women. Furthermore, the executive agencies that deliver SDC's RI programmes often lack the skills to effectively support empowerment processes with women. To address these issues at policy, programme and project level, interventions to promote women's empowerment need to be embedded in a systemic approach which includes work at the national level as well as local, and with men as well as women.

In this learning trajectory, we highlight the following key learning points for policy:

- **Roma women's empowerment is strategic for Roma inclusion, and needs to be understood as a process.** It requires moving away from an approach to working with women as service providers, to supporting processes for women's empowerment, starting by supporting women to grow their confidence and skills as individuals, and this is where most investment should be focused.
- **Supporting Roma women's empowerment requires awareness of discrimination:** avoid the risk of double exploitation through sexism from their families and through putting the burden of development projects on their shoulders. This means working with men, with decision makers, with non-Roma, with a focus on antigypsyism and women's oppression at the same time.
- **There are various entry points** to promote women's empowerment, and we need to be aware of how they are linked. Programs may start with economic empowerment and/or education, but need to be integrated and long term, to include community organising, tackling discrimination and with women's leadership as an outcome.

2. Roma women's empowerment is strategic in strengthening Roma inclusion

Roma women can have a central role in social change, as long as we ensure that our programs support their empowerment. Women are disproportionately represented in community initiative groups, but failure to explicitly support them to become decision makers is exploiting them as "good volunteers" and perpetuating their stereotyped role as mothers and care-givers, not as leaders and decision makers. There are other more empowering entry points for working with women. For example, small investments to support Roma women to take on leadership role give big returns, because they are transformed into messengers for other Roma women and for future generations. In the wider society, most of the decision makers are still men, and while women may feel powerful inside the home, they do not feel powerful in public or political spaces. Sexism combines with racism as soon as a Roma woman leaves the home and/or steps out of the classic gender role and engages in activism.

In Romania, Hungary and Bosnia, our Executing Agencies are working with women because it is easier and they show up for meetings, not for strategic reasons or to empower them. There is limited understanding of women's empowerment amongst Local Authorities and Executing Agencies. This leads to lost opportunities and may have unintended detrimental effects. In Bulgaria, our thematic fund agreement on Roma inclusion includes an empowerment line, but the municipalities interpret this as supporting cultural identity. At national level, without a minimum shared agreement on

empowerment, it is difficult to work together. In Bosnia, almost all volunteers in Roma NGOs are women; in Bulgaria, SDC has municipal project teams, in which 90% are women. Women are coming forward to do the work, but at the level of decision making, they are all men.

Recommendations:

- I. **Dedicate resources to programs focused on women's empowerment**, even if there is no clear sectoral goal (e.g. more children in education, better healthcare) in sight. Our learning is that community development can happen through working with women.
- II. **Programs should include projects that create safe spaces for women**; these safe spaces are the seedlings of organisation and movement building, and a crucial first step in empowering women to overcome personal as well as policy barriers. The safety and solidarity developed can ensure women's empowerment projects are sustainable. From here, support women to take on decision-making roles.
- III. **Invest in building the capacity of Executing Agencies and municipalities to promote women's empowerment** through providing gender empowerment training, supporting peer learning /sharing of good practice, and encouraging the collection of gender disaggregated data including indicators of empowerment.

3. To be transformative, Roma inclusion programs need to address racial and gender-based discrimination through taking a systemic approach

Gender and racial discrimination influence all service provision, which means that we cannot approach health, education or economic issues with Roma women without understanding and addressing how discrimination operates in their lives. A discrimination focus needs to be integrated in order to address the barriers and improve the awareness and attitudes of service providers and employers. Unless we work on the 'double discrimination' of women, interventions to improve women's access to health, education and employment will not be effective. Opportunities to be health mediators do not shift discriminatory social norms, and relations within the family remain the same. In order to express voice and to speak out, women also need economic power.

In all settings, we found that women community leaders are often in a lose-lose situation. There are trade-offs between activism and a quiet family life for Roma female activists; some choose activism over family, and experience oppression from their community as a result. Their families feel that their community work takes away attention from the home, so while women fight to raise awareness about the community benefits of what they are doing, they get criticized by the community for not playing their role at home. At the same time, members of the community rely on women community leaders to bring the benefits of outside programs, but criticize them if these benefits are not what they expected. Our learning is that the struggle for women's empowerment is not individual, it is systemic. If the struggle is perceived as individual, the solutions offered will also be individual, and often isolate women (such solutions could be women marrying outside the community to escape persecution). If the struggle is seen as collective then the solutions are also collective.

Recommendations:

- I. Make women's empowerment explicitly part of every project, to ensure that you don't exploit women's work
- II. Work strategically to support women's empowerment through a range of connected interventions in order for outcomes to be transformative and sustainable. One-off interventions are described by beneficiaries as 'selling us dreams' and then walking away.
 - These sustainable approaches include activities which build Roma women's confidence and skills and extend their voice and influence in the community – build capacities for activism into projects for service provision – they can work in synergy and produce better results.
 - Work across the system, at local and national levels. Working on women's empowerment requires an understanding of the interconnectedness of the different forms of discrimination and how they operate, in order to avoid or mitigate doing harm. Working systemically means working on gender equality with men as well as women; working with municipalities as well

as Roma communities; and with non-Roma service providers, to improve their understanding of empowerment and avoid instrumentalist approaches.

4. Effective Roma women's empowerment requires an integrated approach to programming which takes a range of entry points but links economic empowerment with education, health promotion and active citizenship

Women's empowerment needs to be integrated across a range of programs in order to address the multiple barriers that Roma women experience. While education is often the entry point, it needs to be accompanied by interventions to transform gender norms, and economic opportunities to pave the way to i) closing the social gap with the mainstream; ii) increasing communication and interaction between Roma and mainstream, which in turn gives space for Roma families to adopt values of education, to support their children to go to school and finish their education, and allow for traditional parents to support their girls to go to school (this breaks the inter-generational transmission of low educational attainment and women's disempowerment).

In Romania, women's empowerment was promoted through the Health Mediator programme, which was successful and rolled out but was not enough, and so the entry point was changed to education of girls, but this was not reaching adult women, and so the policy focus changed to economic empowerment. In Bosnia, an economic empowerment project also used forum theatre to educate about discrimination, and through involving children and young people, they reached their parents.

Recommendations

- I. Choose the best entry point according to the opportunities in the context. The entry point is not the key, what is important is linking one area to another e.g. education and employment, and working with Roma and non-Roma communities to shift attitudes, challenge inaction and discrimination by the local authorities; and open up more opportunities.
 - If education is the entry point, integrate education about discrimination and work with children, parents and teachers
 - Economic empowerment projects can be an entry point for more direct work on participation and/or discrimination of women
 - A good entry point can be to start with the children and then bring in the mothers.

5. Data

Finally, we recommend that programs with a focus on women empowerment need gender-sensitive M&E which is best done through combining participatory approaches and mixed methods. Currently, we lack disaggregated data to understand what works for Roma women, and why. When we try to collect data on level of access to justice for Roma women, trafficking etc, it's almost impossible because it's not disaggregated on ethnic data. We recommend an approach to data collection that has empowerment as an objective. By involving Roma women themselves in data collection/ M&E we can work with them to identify what makes a difference in their lives, and at the same time contribute to their empowerment as they learn to collect and analyse data for themselves. In this way, we can produce relevant indicators for measuring women's empowerment.

Recommendations:

- I. Develop outcome indicators for women's empowerment through participatory assessment
- II. Pilot ways of developing Romani women's participatory skills
- III. Extend the use of Beneficiary Assessment to include participatory baseline assessment, development of indicators, and monitoring.
- IV. Use innovative methods e.g. cell-phone based