

MAINSTREAMING EMPOWERMENT OF ROMA GRASSROOTS WOMEN

1. Problem analysis

The Roma movement is mainly male-dominated: the voice of women is not often heard. The reasons for this are multiple and interrelated. For instance: women's status in their communities often does not allow them to speak out publicly and their level of education is lower than that of men. In fact, they face double discrimination: they are a marginalised group compared to both mainstream society and Roma men.

One can question if a movement is really representative if half of the people it claims to represent, hardly has the possibility to express its needs and make its voice heard. By including women, the movement gains in power and strengthens its claim on representing the needs and issues of the Roma population.

Further, many scholars state that through women, entire families can be reached, especially the children and the young. Empowerment of Roma women contributes greatly to the creation of an environment in which Roma children grow up as aware citizens of their society. Women that are aware of their rights and place in society pass this self confidence on to their children. It is what the International Step-by-Step association, a leading network of early childhood education and development organizations from Central/Eastern Europe and Central Asia, calls the creation of good soil: the establishment of political, social, economic, and community contexts that can promote quality early childhood practices.

Research shows that the first years in a child's life are crucial in ensuring the child's later success, quality of life and ability to contribute as a responsible citizen. At the same time, children are citizens of today's society; therefore effective investments in the early years are also important to ensure that the rights and needs of young Roma children are met. Focusing on activism and the empowerment of Roma women and the creation of conditions for Early

Childhood Development, thus contributes to both a better represented Roma movement and a better environment for Roma children to grow up.

Although exceptions exist, grassroots Roma women's activism tends to remain local oriented: women appear to be most interested in their direct living environment. Unlike the Roma youth, self-organization on other than local level is problematic for most Roma women. At the same time, the gap between the few 'elite' Roma women engaged on regional, national and even international level and their grassroots peers is wide.

Linking grassroots Roma women to their more educated and elite peers is a method to bridge this gap. The latter function as role models that help in representing grassroots Roma interests on regional, national and international level. Identifying with role models can be a very empowering tool. This process is however time-consuming and its results are moderate. Expected results after five years for this group is therefore more oriented towards local level.

Besides, migration offers interesting openings for Roma women's empowerment. Roma women that migrated to West-European countries were exposed to a different lifestyle and went through different processes. Research indicates that their status improves after migrating. Studying the mechanisms of Roma women's emancipation after migration can provide us with important insights.

2. Towards collective empowerment of Roma women

Gaining access to power is an essential part of empowerment. Four different forms of power can be distinguished:

1. Power over: this power involves a mutually exclusive relationship of domination or subordination. It assumes that power exists only in limited quantity. This power is exerted over someone or, less negatively, allows "someone to be guided". It triggers either passive or active resistance.
2. Power to: a power which includes the ability to make decisions, have authority, and find solutions to problems, and which can be creative and enabling. The notion therefore refers to intellectual abilities (knowledge and know-how) as well as economic means, i.e. to the ability to access and control means of production and benefit (the notion of assets).
3. Power with: social or political power which highlights the notion of common purpose or understanding, as well as the ability to get together to negotiate and defend a common goal (individual and collective rights, political ideas such as lobbying, etc.). Collectively, people feel they have power when they

can get together and unite in search of a common objective, or when they share the same vision.

4. Power within: this notion of power refers to self-awareness, self-esteem, identity and assertiveness (knowing how to be). It refers to how individuals, through self-analysis and internal power, can influence their lives and make changes.

The notion of empowerment as it used by Spolu and ERGO refers to enlarging power to, power with and power within. We distinguish two levels of empowerment:

- Individual empowerment that is about the process to acquire greater independence and capacities to determine one's own choices.
- Collective empowerment that is about the capacity of a group to influence social change.

After critical reflection about past efforts in working with grassroots Roma women groups, we conclude that the process of collective empowerment would be facilitated by focussing more on an important aspect of *power with*: strengthening those women that function as bridges between the grassroots groups on the one hand and the broader Roma movement, other women groups, national policies and/or other organisations and institutions on the other hand.

Brokering

The anthropological concept of 'cultural broker' is helpful in exploring this bridging function. The anthropologist Jezewski (1990) defines cultural brokering as the act of bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change. A cultural broker acts as a go-between, one who advocates on behalf of another individual or group (Jezewski & Sotnik, 2001).

Another anthropologist, Silverman (1965), said that the model of cultural brokers (she calls them mediators) allows for some variation in:

- Type of relationships.
- Mechanisms to establish relationships.
- Frequency and intensity of relationships.
- Nature of mediators.
- Functions.
- Size of mediating group.
- Kind of integration with local system.

Brokers may be part of the local system yet not reside in the community, they may reside locally but remain detached from the local system, or they may be outsiders with only tangential relationships to the local system.

2. Role of Roma women brokers

The cultural anthropological concept of broker mostly refers to people who facilitate the crossing over between different cultural systems. It is widely used in the health sector, where mediators have the tasks to facilitate the access of indigenous groups to health services. Brokering in a service oriented approach and in an empowerment oriented approach is, obviously, different. It requires specificities in the type of relationship, mechanisms to establish them and the nature of the ties with the grassroots groups.

Further, in the reality of Roma communities, the issue is not only related to different cultural systems, but also to access to strategic persons and lack of know-how, capacities and educational level. This hampers both the mobilization and activation of women and their possibilities to influence public decision making. The 'brokers' thus not only bridge different cultural realities, but also facilitate contacts between grassroots level and strategic persons. They develop and transfer know-how and they use their capacities to represent grassroots interests.

The women that could function as brokers need to be capable of representing grassroots interest, have a network within civil society and/or the Roma movement and/or the political scene. Women brokers can be found within, but also out of the Roma communities. They can be Roma women activists or women that work professionally with grassroots women. They could have professional jobs or be Roma "advocates" and mediators from other projects. What makes the women brokers is that they have good relations with both the grassroots women groups and strategic other groups and/or authorities and/or institutions. They open new perspectives for the grassroots groups and facilitate their integrations into domains they would otherwise not have access to.

Their main role is to help grassroots women in effectively representing their interest. To be effective brokers that stimulate empowerment of the women around them, they need to be open to transfer their capacities to other women in the group and share leadership responsibilities.

Women brokers are either linked to grassroots groups on an incidental basis through lobby and advocacy campaigns, or on a long-term basis as leaders of a group of grassroots women or as mediators.

The women brokers will be in charge of mobilising women by doing activities that interest them. To do this, they are supported by the partner organisations in the programme that manage a funds for grassroots activities.

4. Support measures to the women

Experience shows that the burden on these women is big and sometimes too much. They face mistrust from women in their groups and they have the burden of being the main person that represents the groups towards others. Trust building between the women in the groups and emotional support are important for the groups to function properly. Still, a hampering factor for the development of grassroots groups is the fact that community leaders stop their activism because they get 'burn out' and loose their motivation. Support measures should be aimed at preventing this.

Attracting women brokers and keeping them motivated

The most challenging task is to interest those women that have capacities and can bind other women, but that have not been active in the Roma movement so far. Women that have been active in the field of Roma activism might be more easily attracted to helping grassroots groups. It remains however difficult to keep the motivation of these women and to attract them for a longer time. Already, we mentioned that women tend to get burn out. Previous interventions of Spolu and its partners learned that one of the factors that although the women experience their actions as noble and necessary, they get very little personal reward out of it. This leads to a loss of motivation in the long run.

It is thus important to include an element of personal benefit for the women brokers in the programme. This can be done through creating personal development funds for the women, which they can use to follow courses, seminars or trainings that they like for their personal development. Women that want to benefit from these funds need to commit themselves to staying involved in the programme and to guiding grassroots women groups.

Awards will be issued to those women in the programme that managed to get good results with the grassroots groups they guide. Criteria for this reward are related to the lobby and advocacy results, number of women mobilised and level of participation of grassroots women in the activities.

Emotional support to the women brokers

To prevent the women from losing their motivation because they feel their role is too heavy, the programme will bring the women brokers together and create support groups. These support groups will use methods of *peer supervision*. The essence of peer supervision is the fact that peers (in his case women brokers) give each other support and feedback to find solutions for their problems. It doesn't require the presence of an expert, the members of a peer supervision group coach and supervise each other. It reinforces problem solving skills of the women and helps them to cope with difficulties they face, while at the same time providing a supportive and safe environment.

Trust building and bonding between brokers and women groups

Of essential importance is the process of trust building between the women brokers and the grassroots groups. The Mother Centres movement developed a methodology for trust building in grassroots women groups. Also, Spolu and its partners have expertise in building trust in grassroots groups. Besides Spolu's partners, the Mother centres network Mine will be involved in providing regular coaching and support to both the grassroots groups and women brokers.

A very important element of trust building within the women groups and between the brokers and the groups, is space for informal contacts. Within the Mother centres, this space is provided naturally, since the gatherings themselves mostly have an informal character. Also in other groups, this space should be provided. Part of the coaching is the organisation of social events, in which the women can interact and bond informally.

In the course of the Strengthening the Roma Voice programme, successful experiences and examples have developed. An organisation with a philosophy close to Spolu's and ERGO's, is Mine, the International Mother Centre network. Mother centres are low threshold centres owned and managed by grassroots women in which lobby and advocacy activities develop naturally. Mother Centre Plamen in Bosnia received many Roma groups and inspired them to create their own centres. In Bulgaria, several Roma Mother Centres were an example for Roma women groups that wanted to start their own centre. The Mother centre network Mine developed methods for women's grassroots empowerment that can help Spolu and ERGO in activating and mobilising Roma women.

5. International co-operation

While Integro is taking a role as Regional Resource Organisation, the Mother centre Plamen is developing into a training centre in the International Mother Centre network. Both organisations can have a key function in spreading methods, approaches and grassroots (Roma) women activism in Europe. The Mother Centre network would gain in diversity by including Roma women groups and centres. The Mother centre network can help the Roma women in linking to the broader women movement.

An international working group on Roma women empowerment will be created. The working group is not in charge of managing a programme, but is mandated to follow the development in the different countries linked to ERGO, to further develop methods of grassroots women empowerment and to formulate suggestions for co-operation between organisations or individuals. Those organisations and/or individuals can decide to fundraise for separate women programmes, but they can also decide to mainstream a focus on Roma women in their regular activities.

Also, the working group is in charge of starting up studies and experiments to further develop method and approaches. An example could be the study of the mechanisms of empowerment of migrated Roma women and experimenting in linking these migrated women to their peers in the grassroots communities in their mother country.