

# From Shame to Pride: Journey to Activism

## Sefer Shaqir

As a child, I used to hide my identity. I would lie when asked about my family, afraid of other people's reaction. Today, I stand proudly as a Roma youth activist, speaking out for the very community I once felt I had to conceal.

I remember my first incident as if it happened yesterday. I was six years old, playing with my friends in the street, when one of them pointed out that I was Roma. He said, "We don't want to play with gypsies. They are dirty and beggars." To a six-year-old, those words were world-crushing. Not the word gypsy itself, but the rejection: "We don't want to be your friend."

Now put yourself in my parents' shoes. How would you feel if your child came home and asked, "Mom, why don't they want to be my friends?" I will tell you what my parents did. They told me, "Don't tell people you are Roma. Tell them you are Turkish."

At that time, I did not understand why people were afraid of Roma. But I knew one thing: in their eyes, I was not human, but something less. Whenever people asked me, "Oh, you speak Turkish, are you Turkish?" I would nod and pretend. I wore that fake identity every day, hiding who I really was. I even laughed along at derogatory jokes about Roma, and sometimes ignored relatives in the street so no one would know. On the other hand, I excelled at school, always at the top of my class. I made my parents proud with my success, yet something was still missing inside. A big part of me was gone.

By the age of 15, I started asking questions. Why am I hiding? Why do people use 'gypsy' as an insult? Why are people afraid of Roma? Everything changed when I attended a seminar on Roma empowerment. It felt like a switch in my brain. For others, it might have seemed like a small step, but for me, at 17, it was life-changing.

I learned that many cultures have taken from ours. That the Roma people have always been resilient, creative, and successful. That our history is full of suffering, yet we always found ways to celebrate and create joy. That day I asked myself, Why should I be ashamed? And it became my wake-up call. Now I understand why people fear us. Because we work twice as hard. Because our culture is rich. Because we support one another, strive for excellence, and carry kindness in our hearts. And that is nothing to fear—it is something to admire.

We all have a choice: to let discrimination continue or to challenge it. My journey from shame to pride is not mine alone—it is a call for every young person, Roma and non-Roma, to stand up, speak out, and create a future where no child feels ashamed of who they are. "Sem barikano so sem Rom" – I am proud to be Roma.

**Short bio:** My name is Sefer Shaqir. I am 25 years old, from Tetovo, North Macedonia, and I am a proud Roma. I work as a front-end developer, and Roma empowerment has given me the strength to embrace my identity. I hope to inspire other young Roma to do the same.