



Empowerment and Participation – Grassroots Democracy by Roma and Non-Roma Women

**Baseline Study of the Roma Community
in Valea Seacă, Romania**

Andreea Bragă Lari Peltonen



HELSINKI
DEACONESS INSTITUTE

HDL RAPORTTI # 02/2015, HDI REPORT # 02/2015

ISBN 978-952-9854-16-5 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-952-9854-17-2 (PDF)

ISSN 2323-5837 (Print)

ISSN 2342-7396 (Online)

The project was funded by Helsinki Parish Union and Helsinki Deaconess Institute.

The information and views set out in this study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Helsinki Deaconess Institute.

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Editorial Board: Antti Elenius, Kristiina Elenius, Anca Enache, Markku Niskanen

Photo Credits: Vasile Potolea

Design: Hipateos Oy

Printing: Grano Oy, Finland 2015

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Executive Summary

The experience of the Helsinki Deaconess Institute in working with the migrant Roma in Helsinki has aroused an idea of supporting the Roma also in their communities of origin, such as in Valea Seacă in Romania. This report is intended as a baseline study about the socio-economic circumstances of the Roma and the wider community, particularly women, in the respective municipality. It also feeds into planning and designing the foreseen project empowering Roma women and other vulnerable groups in Valea Seacă, and serves the wider audience in better understanding the circumstances of the Roma at the grassroots level.

As a European Union (EU) member state, Romania is committed to implement relevant EU policies for advancing social inclusion of the vulnerable groups. In addition, the country has adopted a national Roma inclusion strategy. However, there are significant shortcomings in implementing these policies, and the available data indicates that the Romanian Roma are more disadvantaged in access to education, employment, health care and housing when compared to the majority of Romanians.

In Valea Seacă, issues pertaining to the education of Roma children are low levels of school participation. Roma girls in particular are at risk of dropping out of school. However, even those Roma who finish the secondary school still face major obstacles in finding sustainable formal jobs, and the social assistance schemes for the unemployed are scant. This is why many have decided to migrate to Western and North-European countries to seek better livelihood.

Roma also suffer from worse health than the majority of Romanians. Many Roma are outside of the national health insurance scheme, which is why they cannot obtain the European Health Insurance Card either. These can cause grave obstacles when trying to access health care services in the country of origin, as well as in other EU countries. Also, for instance, sexual education is non-existent, which is partly a reason why many Roma girls get pregnant under the age of eighteen years.

Other problems facing the Roma in Valea Seacă are squalid living conditions that have multiple negative impacts on the everyday life. The most vulnerable Roma are the ones who are not registered. They do not have identity cards nor can they access any public services – officially these people do not exist. Furthermore, women face various vulnerabilities. At the local level and among many communities, their needs and voices remain largely unheard.

Tackling these issues needs first and foremost firm interventions by the Romanian government at all levels. Nevertheless, civil society actors have an important role in bridging the equity gap between the Roma and the majority of Romanians. The Helsinki Deaconess Institute can contribute to this work in implementing a project in Valea Seacă and bringing to practice its methods of community participation that have been successfully implemented in other parts of the world.

Tiivistelmä – Executive Summary in Finnish

Helsingin Diakonissalaitoksella on tehty useiden vuosien ajan työtä siirtolaisromanien parissa Suomessa. Kokemusten pohjalta muodostui ajatus romanien tukemisesta heidän lähtömaissaan ja omissa yhteisöissään, kuten Valea Seacăn kunnassa Romaniassa. Tämä selvitys kuvaa romanien ja laajemman yhteisön sekä erityisesti naisten sosio-ekonomista tilannetta Valea Seacässä. Selvitys tukee Helsingin Diakonissalaitoksen hanketta, jonka tavoitteena on voimaannuttaa romaninaisia ja muita haavoittuvia ryhmiä Valea Seacässä. Selvitys palvelee myös kaikkia niitä, jotka haluavat lisätä ymmärrystään romanien olosuhteista ruohonjuuritasolla.

Euroopan unionin (EU) jäsenmaana Romania on sitoutunut toteuttamaan EU:n politiikkaa, jonka tavoitteena on edistää haavoittuvien ryhmien osallisuutta. Lisäksi Romania on hyväksynyt romanien osallisuutta edistävän kansallisen strategian. Näiden linjausten toteuttamisessa on kuitenkin suuria puutteita. Saatavilla oleva tieto osoittaa, että Romanian romanit ovat pääväestöön verrattuna huonommassa asemassa, kun tarkastellaan heidän asumisolosuhteitaan sekä mahdollisuuksia päästä koulutukseen, työhön ja terveyspalveluihin.

Valea Seacăn kunnassa ongelmana on, etteivät romanilapset käy koulussa. Erityisesti romanitytöt ovat vaarassa jäädä koulutuksen ulkopuolelle. Myöskään romanit, jotka ovat suorittaneet toisen asteen tutkinon, eivät helposti löydä toimeentulon takaavaa ansiotyötä. Lisäksi työttömille maksettavat sosiaa-

liavustukset ovat hyvin niukkoja. Monet romanit lähtevätkin etsimään parempaa elämää ja toimeentuloa Länsi- ja Pohjois-Euroopasta.

Romanien terveys on valtaväestöä heikompi. Monet romanit ovat kansallisen sairausvakuutusjärjestelmän ulkopuolella, ja näin ollen heille ei myönnetä eurooppalaista sairaanhoitokorttia. Tämä vaikeuttaa terveyspalveluihin pääsemistä sekä lähtöä muissa EU-maissa. Lisäksi seksuaalikasvatuksen puute on osasyy siihen, että monet romanitytöt tulevat raskaiksi alle 18-vuotiaina.

Valea Seacăn surkeat asuinolosuhteet vaikeuttavat romanien jokapäiväistä elämää. Kaikkein haavoittuvimpia ovat romanit, joita ei ole rekisteröity väestötietoihin. Heillä ei ole henkilöllisyystodistuksia eivätkä he voi hyödyntää julkisia palveluja – virallisesti näitä ihmisiä ei ole olemassa. Etenkin naiset ovat monella tapaa haavoittuvia. Paikallistasolla ja monissa yhteisöissä naisten tarpeita ei edelleenkään huomioida riittävästi.

Romaniväestön ongelmien selvittäminen vaatii ensisijaisesti Romanian hallituksen päättäväisiä toimia hallinnon kaikilla tasoilla. Myös kansalaisyhteiskunnan toimijoilla on tärkeä rooli romanien ja valtaväestön välisen elintasokuilun umpeen kuromisessa. Helsingin Diakonissalaitoksen hanke Valea Seacässä voi olla osa tätä työtä. Myös Diakonissalaitoksen kehittämää yhteisömetodeja voidaan hyödyntää, ja niitä on jo menestyksekkäästi sovellettu muissa hankkeissa.

Since May 2014 the Helsinki Deaconess Institute has worked on the planning of a local project in Valea Seacă, Romania. The project aims to promote the equality and empowerment of the Roma women in the community, through participatory practices and partnership with the local civil society and stakeholders.



1

Introduction

Since Romania entered the European Union (EU) in 2007, the European discussion has increasingly focused around the migrants within the Union, many of whom belong to the Roma minority in Romania and other Central and Eastern European countries. Leaving their country because of extreme poverty and social exclusion, the Roma are primarily perceived in the destination countries as a security or public order issue. Furthermore, their migration, which is often temporary and circular, poses challenges for the destination societies regarding the provision of social welfare and health services to them. This affects the accompanying children most severely, who often cannot attend school and have to live in squalid makeshift accommodations.

Finland has not been an exception in this regard. Although the number of Roma migrants has remained small (around 400–1000 annually) in comparison to some other European countries such as Sweden, France, Italy and Spain, the appearance of Roma from mostly Romania and Bulgaria has attracted plenty of public attention. On the one hand the Finnish discussion has focused on the negative side effects of Roma migration, which mainly have been begging and homelessness, and on the other hand on the human rights challenges and social exclusion that the Roma encounter in their countries of origin. There have been several articles in Finnish newspapers and magazines, for example in *Helsingin*

Sanomat and *Suomen Kuvalehti*, about the conditions in which the Roma live in Romania, drawing understanding to their reasons for leaving. Furthermore, the phenomenon has triggered a discussion on whether begging should be outlawed, but no legislative measures have been executed to date¹.

The Helsinki Deaconess Institute has taken an active role in studying the social circumstances of the migrant Roma in Finland and finding solutions to assist them. In 2008–2010, the Helsinki Deaconess Institute implemented the project *Rom po Drom* together with the Helsinki City, the Helsinki Parish Union and the Finnish Ecumenical Council. The *Rom po Drom* had an objective of gathering information on the migrant Roma in Helsinki, provide acute support, advocate for human rights implementation at the EU level, and facilitate cooperation and communication between various authorities and other stakeholders.

The project fed into the subsequent initiative, the *Hirundo* drop-in centre run by the Helsinki Deaconess Institute since 2011 with funding from the Helsinki City and the Helsinki Parish Union. The main objectives stated in the project plan of the *Hirundo* service were: to provide social support, information and acute humanitarian aid for the most vulnerable Roma migrants; to provide knowledge to the authorities and to minimize the social and health problems that might develop in Helsinki; to lobby and advocate for the rights of the migrants and Roma; and to empower and improve the situation of the women and children on the move (this last work stream has been started and developed in 2014). The drop-in centre

has been a frequented place among the foreign Roma in Helsinki, however drawing also controversies among the local people on whether or not the Roma should be provided any support. In October 2014, the European Economic and Social Committee rewarded the *Hirundo* drop-in centre in the 2014 Civil Society Prize competition.

The long experience of the Helsinki Deaconess Institute derived from working with groups at risk of exclusion in general and Roma migrants in particular has clearly underlined the fact that there should be a focus on the systemic and structural factors of the inequalities behind exclusion and potential practices to address them. This has aroused an idea to support the Roma in their communities of origin. Furthermore, the Helsinki Deaconess Institute has developed and successfully implemented inclusive community methods in Southern Africa and the Wider Europe region that can be replicated among various marginalized communities².

According to the *Rom po Drom* project report³, the Romanian Roma in Finland came mainly from Transylvania area and the counties of Teleorman and Gorj in the south of the country. Lately, there has been a surge of migrants also from the Bacău County, which is located in the North-Eastern Romania. Since the spring of 2014, the Helsinki Deaconess Institute has done preparatory work towards launching a project on empowerment and participation, focusing on Roma and non-Roma women in the community of Valea Seacă, in the Bacău County of Romania.

1 More information on migrant Roma in Finland: Enache,

2 More information about the Helsinki Deaconess Institute community methods available at: Elenius, 2014.

3 Leinonen and Vesalainen, 2008.

This report is intended as a baseline study of social exclusion in the Municipality of Valea Seacă, focusing on the situation of poor Roma and non-Roma women and their challenges in accessing equal opportunities compared to the majority of Romanians. This report cannot be considered as a comprehensive analysis of the situation, but it nevertheless aims to draw sufficient conclusions and bring recommendations for further project design.

The information used in this report is derived from interviews conducted in Valea Seacă in November 2014 and from qualitative and to lesser extent quantitative data obtained through desk-review of relevant research, statistics, and reports available. Financial support for drafting this report has been received from the Helsinki Parish Union and the Helsinki Deaconess Institute, while the latter was in charge of the work related to the implementation of the Baseline Study.

The views expressed within the report do not necessarily reflect those of the Helsinki Deaconess Institute. Also, the key results presented in the Baseline Study cannot be generalized to the entire Roma population in Valea Seacă or other communities in Romania. For readability purposes this report uses the term 'Roma' for various groups such as the *Căldărari*, *Ursari*⁴ and others acknowledging the diversities and commonalities of these groupings and understanding that members of these groups do not necessarily affiliate themselves primarily with the term 'Roma'.



.....

4 Many groups call themselves according to their traditional occupation. For instance, the traditional livelihood of the Căldărari has been working as blacksmiths, while the Ursari used to be bear handlers.



The study focused particularly on the Roma women needs and experiences at the local level, aiming to make their voices heard, and included in the political agenda.

2

Baseline Objectives and Methodology

Objectives

The Helsinki Deaconess Institute contracted independent advisors, Andreea Bragă and Lari Peltonen, to design and draft the Baseline Study based on field work in the Municipality of Valea Seacă. The focus of the Baseline Study was to provide empirical documentation and to establish the status of Roma and non-Roma women and their specific needs in the Municipality of Valea Seacă where the Helsinki Deaconess Institute will consider implementing the Empowerment and Participation: Grassroots Democracy by Roma and Non-Roma Women (EPR) Project. The Baseline Study will feed into planning of the potential EPR Project upon accepting the project design, securing funding, and finding a relevant partner to implement the project.

The **overall objective** of the Baseline Study feeding into the EPR Project is to support the mobilisation and empowerment of marginalised Roma and non-Roma, particularly women in their local community, and to enhance their social inclusion through the development of grassroots participatory initiatives in a process that enhances their genuine voices, interests, and ownership of the activities.

The **specific objectives** of the Baseline Study are:

1. to identify challenges and constraints faced by Roma and non-Roma women in Valea Seacă
2. to provide both qualitative and quantitative data (where applicable) on their situation
3. to recommend inputs for the design of the EPR project.

Data Gathering

The desk review contained the study of available literature and policy frameworks both on the inter-governmental level (such as the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies by 2020) and the Romanian national policies, and relevant studies related to Roma and Roma women in Romania. Statistical data available was used where relevant, although the demographic data on Roma cannot be considered sound (see the sub-chapter on demographics below). The doctoral thesis of Advisor Andreea Bragă, focusing on gendered violence in Valea Seacă, provided valuable information about women's rights in the municipality.

The interviews conducted during the field work trip to Valea Seacă in 12–14 November 2014 provided the main body of data for this report. During the field trip, Advisor Lari Peltonen (with the assistance of Andreea Bragă) focused on interviews with public authorities and service providers to find out about shortcomings in the provision of adequate services

to all and about the specific problems that the Roma, particularly the women face in the society. Advisor Andreea Bragă conducted the interviews with the Roma women. In addition, informal discussions with teachers, pupils and other residents of Valea Seacă provided invaluable insight into the wider social and economic challenges in the municipality.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with a few key questions accompanied by additional questions. In addition, participatory observation gave a complementary picture of the social dynamics in the village.

For this report, Bragă had interviews with seven Roma women who represent the most economically deprived Roma in Valea Seacă. The women's names are not disclosed in this report to preserve their privacy. The aim of the qualitative research on Roma women from Valea Seacă was to identify their problems and challenges as influenced by several different dimensions such as: one's gender, social class, education, ethnicity, religion, education, age or disability.⁵

The results of the study emphasise the experiences of the Roma women, and aim at making their voices and problems heard, as well as introducing their rights and needs on the local agenda. The seven women who participated in the interviews had a similar social background regarding their level of education, work life and economic strategies. While they were children, they went with their parents to work seasonally in farms from spring to winter,

.....
 5 More information about the various challenges the Roma women face: Vincze, 2006.

which eventually led to early school dropout. Like many other Roma from Valea Seacă, they worked informally in agriculture without a labour contract, proper health care, unemployment benefits or pension.⁶



.....
⁶ Bragă, 2014, pp. 87-89.



The large number of children in many Roma families reflects the low level of education, insufficient reproductive health advice and the traditional family model within some communities.

3

Roma in Valea Seacă, Romania

Demographics

According to the 2011 census figures, around 620 000 people declared themselves to be of Roma ethnicity out of the roughly 20 million people in total living in Romania. Thus, the Roma would comprise the third largest ethnic group in Romania after Romanians and Hungarians. However, various organizations working on Roma inclusion have stated that several Roma were reluctant to declare themselves as Roma in the latest census due to fear of discrimination and stigmatization; so the real figures would be significantly (up to 4–5 times) higher. Hence, according to the highest estimates there would be more than 2 million Roma in Romania, making the Roma likely the largest ethnic minority in the country.

According to the census, Roma are spread across all the 41 counties and the Municipality of Bucharest. Both proportionally and absolutely the largest Roma minority lives in the Mureș County (close to 47 000 Roma or 8.5 %), followed by Călărași, Sălaj and Bihor, each having 6 % or more Roma living in the county.

Out of the approximately 270 000 people living in the Bacău County, there were around 15 300 or 2.5 % self-declared Roma.

Out of the nearly 3900 people living in Valea Seacă, 1280 or roughly one third declared themselves as Roma. According to the census data, Valea Seacă would be the municipality with the proportionally largest Roma community in the Bacău County.⁷ Our

informants estimated the share of Roma in Valea Seacă had increased during the last decades. However, there are reasons to believe the census data is distorted although the official figures are in line with the estimations of the people interviewed in Valea Seacă. Getting an accurate and up-to-date count is further complicated by the significant waves of movement of Romanians, including Roma, in and out of the country since Romania entered the EU in 2007.



Location of Valea Seacă on the Romanian map.

⁷ Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2011.

In addition, the Roma population is very young. According to the results of the regional Roma household survey conducted by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency, United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank; the Roma have higher birth rates and a smaller proportion of elderly people in the population⁸, which is also a result of lower life expectancy among the Roma. The large number of children in many Roma families reflects the low level of education, insufficient reproductive health advice and the traditional family model within some communities. This has resulted in a demographic profile that is in high contrast to the narrowing population pyramid of the general population. These demographic trends within the Roma minority and within Romania's general population put an even larger emphasis on the need to increase the social inclusion of the Roma.

Political Framework and Civil Society Involvement

The first Roma strategy of Romania adopted in 2001 preceded the country's EU accession and was influenced by the EU membership negotiations. Romania adopted its second Roma Inclusion Strategy for 2012–2020⁹ (NRIS) in 2011. The current strategy includes directions for action in the fields of education, employment, health, housing and small infrastructure, culture, and prevention and fighting against discrimination, in line with the recent social inclusion policies of the EU. The NRIS has been recently

revised to include concrete action plans in the above mentioned directions of action, entailing a detailed budget and indicators for specific interventions.

However, there are concerns over the implementation of the strategy since the process of drafting the NRIS did not include proper evaluation of the successes and shortcomings of the previous strategy. Moreover, the baseline situation analysis is weak, which makes further monitoring and evaluation equally difficult. The NRIS is also a soft political instrument without sanctions for underachievements in certain areas, and since coordination between different stakeholders is difficult, full implementation of the NRIS remains a challenge. The informants in Valea Seacă were not widely aware about the NRIS. This is an indication of the common problem with state level strategies and action plans: the grassroots level is rarely knowledgeable of them, which translates into meagre results.

In addition to policies, several administrative offices and structures have been founded in Romania to enforce Roma inclusion. The National Agency for Roma (NAR) was established in 2004 to coordinate and monitor the implementation of the Roma strategy and to bring together representatives from line ministries, other government agencies and Roma civil society, for a dialogue to improve the social and economic situation of Roma, promote Roma culture and employment, and monitor the development of their social participation and living conditions. Also, there is a high-level Inter-Ministerial Working Group

8 United Nations Development Programme/World Bank/
European Commission, 2011.

9 Government of Romania, 14 December 2011.



for line ministries responsible for implementing the NRIS, and sectorial Ministerial Commissions for discussing specific challenges, such as education, health and employment. Furthermore, the NAR has seven regional offices that cover all the counties in Romania, in addition to which every county has a County Office for Roma under the Prefect Office. Some municipalities have also hired local Roma experts to liaise between the majority population, municipal authorities, and Roma communities (this was not the case in Valea Seacă). There seemed to be no major cooperation between the Valea Seacă authorities and the above-mentioned institutions and structures.

As an EU member state, Romania is committed to implement the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up until 2020. The framework was preceded by years of discussion in different EU bodies on the human right situation of the Roma. Moreover, the EU funding scheme offers a significant funding potential for projects promoting social inclusion of vulnerable groups. During the current programming period 2014–2020, Roma are mentioned as one of the priority groups in the Human Capital Operational Programme that covers social inclusion interventions.

However, the absorption rate of the EU structural funds of the 2007–2013 programming period is likely to remain low (the tranches run until the end of 2016). The reasons for the low absorption rate and scant results in advancing Roma inclusion with the EU funds

lie within weaknesses in implementation; because of the lack of know-how and administrative capacity of the managing authorities on the ground; the lack of involvement and capacity of civil society and Roma communities; problems in providing co-financing; and the lack of political will to improve the situation of the Roma.

Additionally, as a member state of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Romania has made a commitment to implement the policies of these intergovernmental organizations. Out of the United Nations (UN) organizations present in Romania, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) implement some grass-roots projects that benefit the Roma. Also, the World Bank has a significant role as an organization promoting economic independence of the Roma.

Finally, one should not forget the invaluable work of numerous civil society organizations. During the discussions with the municipality representatives, we did not come across any resident Roma organizations in Valea Seacă. A recently finalized project implemented by the Association for United Europe (*Asociația pentru o Europă Unită*) in cooperation with the Municipality of Valea Seacă focused on land registration. In addition, the organization *Valoare Plus* with Pentecostal affiliation implements after-school activities for pupils of the Elementary School nr. 1 of Valea Seacă with financial assistance from

the Swedish *SAM-hjälp*. Furthermore, *E-Romnja* Association (The Association for Promoting Roma Women's Rights) together with three other organizations focusing on Roma inclusion, gender equality and human rights, have applied and received funding from the Open Society Foundation for a project called *Phenja – Violence against Women has No Colour* (implementation period 2015-2017). The *Phenja* project is designed to combat gender-based violence in three Romanian municipalities, Valea Seacă being one of them. The Helsinki Deaconess Institute project should be planned and implemented in complementarity and cooperation with the on-going *Phenja* project.

Nevertheless, despite the political framework, government and civil society interventions, a large number of Romanian Roma is excluded from the mainstream society. Several studies and reports, such as the Romanian Country Report of the EU INCLUSIVE initiative¹⁰, the Împreună Agency study on Roma in Romania¹¹ and the recent World Bank report on Roma inclusion¹² estimate that the Romanian Roma are more disadvantaged in access to education, employment, health care and housing when compared to the general population in the country. Roma women face even higher risks of exclusion and poverty. These equity gaps are present also in Valea Seacă and will be discussed in further detail below.

10 Soros Foundation Romania, 2012.

11 Agentie Împreună, July 2013.

12 World Bank, February 2014.



For most Roma in Valea Seacă the only income sources are, the social benefits and the informal employment, such as agricultural day labor and other subsistence occupations, such as recycling used materials.

4

Key Results: Education

*"I wish my children would grow up,
have studies and a job."*

– Roma woman, 39 years old

Issues Pertaining to Roma Education

Census data, nation-wide surveys, other unofficial data and interviews with the informants in Valea Seacă suggest that the education level of the Roma is significantly below average at all levels from early childhood education to tertiary education. Although not ethnically disaggregated, the 2011 census results indicate that out of close to 3900 people living in Valea Seacă, there were 292 persons (127 men and 165 women) who had not finished primary school (classes I–IV), out of which 165 persons were stated to be illiterate (64 men and 101 women). Moreover, 1143 persons (488 men and 655 women) or one third of the habitants had completed only primary education; and 931 persons (481 men and 450 women) had completed secondary education (classes V–VIII).¹³

Challenges in Valea Seacă – as in much of Romania – remain in low attendance rates, early school drop-out, absenteeism, lack of school material, early marriages, and early childbearing. Many Roma children speak Romani language at home so the language of instruction (either Romanian or

¹³ Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2011.

Hungarian) causes additional challenges to some. Roma girls are particularly at risk of dropping out of school. Periods of migration to other countries where the children cannot attend school during the short-term stay have become an increasing challenge throughout previous years. In addition, even if these children could have had the chance to attend school abroad, transferring foreign course credits into Romanian credits is a difficult and bureaucratic process, one which requires translations and legalized documents that not all parents can afford to purchase.

A 2011 report by the Romanian sociologists Gelu Duminičă (who is of Roma origin) and Ana Ivasiuc evidences the structural inequalities of the Romanian schools in relation to Roma. It also links the low enrolment of the Roma children to the quality of education provided. In addition, the education system has failed to take into consideration the realities on the ground, including discrimination and self-marginalization as an effect of long term exclusion and counterproductive mentalities. Moreover, according to the same research results, the share of Roma children in a school correlates strongly with the lack of specialized labs, libraries, IT equipment and qualified teachers: roughly, the more Roma children there are in a school, the worse are the conditions.¹⁴ This means that besides the fact that different policies and actions have worked on ending the school segregation for Roma in Romania, segregation has persisted and taken multiple and new forms.¹⁵

According to the school representatives interviewed, increasing the participation of Roma children in education was considered a key factor in advancing Roma inclusion and bridging the equity gap between the Roma and the majority population. In addition to literacy, numeracy, and other skills that are essential later in life, the school was perceived as contributing to social skills of the pupils and wider social cohesion of the whole community, including friendly relations between the Roma and non-Roma (although no major frictions were witnessed in this respect). Since many pupils have difficult family situations, or may have one or both parents abroad, for many the school is also the main place where they receive cognitive stimulation and positive role models.

However, all informants acknowledged that the employment situation especially among the Roma is very difficult and even obtaining a job does not necessarily secure a decent income. Hence, it is understandable that the value of studies and hard work is difficult to see, which is discouraging many Roma children from fully participating in education. This is especially so because many Roma from Valea Seacă have been abroad begging and doing informal jobs like collecting bottles or picking berries that do not require any education, and are still receiving significant income according to Romanian standards.

There was not any official data or comprehensive tracking mechanism to establish the level of absenteeism among the Roma pupils, but the teachers and other school representatives estimated it to be higher than among the children from the majority

14 Duminičă and Ivasiuc, 2011, pp. 45–58.

15 More information about Roma school segregation available at: Fox and Vidra, 2013.

The employment situation especially among the Roma is very difficult and even obtaining a job does not necessarily secure a decent income.

population. Children from the poorest families, like those from the Pălămida quarter were particularly prone to absenteeism. One reason mentioned was the lack of proper clothes and other school material, which also made worse-off children susceptible to ridicule and name-calling by peers. Inadequate studying facilities at home, such as the lack of a desk, privacy or sufficient lighting also made independent studying and doing homework difficult.

Families, Education and Challenges

Some parents of Roma pupils, such as four of the interviewed Roma women, had not gone to school and were completely or partly illiterate. These particular persons were then unable to provide enough support or engagement in their children's learning. One of them, a Roma mother of 30 years had to ask her neighbours to read her child short poems taught in school. Duminičă and Ivasiuc have also evidenced that particularly in rural communities – both Roma and non-Roma – the families do not have the financial means to send their children to upper secondary schools outside the home village. Also, some families are not convinced that investing in education will pay off later in a form of a well-paid job.¹⁶

The worst situation is among the children who are left with grandparents, neighbours or siblings with no real parental figures to supervise their learning outcome. A teacher interviewed mentioned a case where five children had been left alone and the eldest of them, around 13 years of age, was left with a responsibility over the younger siblings. There were other

similar stories but it was also mentioned that the child protection service had intervened in them.

Challenges in some parents' engagement to their children's schooling entailed weak relations between the home and the school. This was manifested by parents' low interest in participating in parental councils or school activities. For instance, the Elementary School No. 1 pupils made a play about the history of slavery – including Roma slavery – in Romania but only parents of 4 pupils out of 22 came to see the play. The school representatives also lamented that it was difficult to establish a dialogical connection with the parents. Especially some Roma parents were reluctant to discuss home problems with the school representatives, which was interpreted by the teachers as suspicion towards authorities. There were also claims that the Roma do not value studies to the level of the majority of Romanians.

In addition to some parents not being able to help their children with the homework, it was mentioned that many parents had notable problems in controlling their children's comings and goings, particularly with their teenagers. One school representative stated rather cynically that 90 % of the parents do not have leverage over their children. Partly it is the lack of parental control that results in anti-social behaviour that was considered increasingly an issue in Valea Seacă. Some youngsters skip classes or have dropped out of the school altogether and spend their time hanging around on the street. Some consume alcohol, although substance abuse was not considered a severe

¹⁶ Duminičă and Ivasiuc, 2011, pp. 114–115.

social problem in the village. Also, there had been cases of vandalism such as window-breaking and a few burglaries with mostly elderly people as victims. One reason behind young people's frustration may lie in the lack of leisure activity options: there were hardly any arts, science, or sports clubs where young people could develop their skills and spend time with their peers in a constructive setting. An increase in extra-curricular activities for children and teenagers would most likely reduce disturbances and unlock young people's potential talents.

Roma Girls Particularly Vulnerable

All informants agreed that Roma girls are in a particularly unfavourable position when it comes to education. A frequently mentioned pattern was one where a girl of 11–13 years of age starts going out with a boy a few years older and starts to attend school more and more seldom, eventually dropping out altogether, finishing perhaps six grades out of the compulsory eight. It was mentioned that in some cases girls' partners prohibited them to attend classes anymore – some out of traditional beliefs according to which a woman's place is in the home, some out of jealousy that at school the girls might meet other boys. However, it was also often that the girls acted out of their own judgement that they did not need to go to school anymore since it would have little to offer them, and their partner could provide sufficient protection.

In many cases it is the parents who decide against their daughters' education. Romanian Roma feminist

scholar Alexandra Oprea argues that this occurs when patriarchy meets poverty – the parents withdraw their daughters from school so that the girls can take care of their younger siblings or contribute to the family income.¹⁷ Patriarchal and traditionalistic norms involve control over Roma women's sexuality, which implies a more restrictive attitude towards them.¹⁸ In one case we heard a Roma girl was withdrawn from upper secondary school by her parents to eliminate the possibility of the girl entering into a relationship at school.

All too often the case with Roma girls is that they get married when still under-aged. These marriages are not legally binding under Romanian law, but are still considered valid in the Roma community. Married girls become sexually active and can get pregnant when they are still literally children themselves, which understandably hinders significantly their chances of pursuing their studies. Although we received contradictory information about the frequency of the phenomenon of early marriage and early childbearing, it is still a severe issue among the Roma. The School Mediator estimated there are 10–15 cases of early marriages annually in Valea Seacă.

Promising Practices

Since 2001, the Romanian Ministry of Education has trained professional Roma school mediators, although challenges remain concerning the programme funding throughout the country. The Municipality of Valea Seacă has participated in the programme since 2005, employing a part-time Roma

17 More information about Roma girl's challenges available at: Oprea, 2005.

18 Bragă, 2014, pp. 138–142.

Roma girls are in a particularly unfavourable position when it comes to education.

mediator to liaise between the schools and the Roma community. The School Mediator assists Roma children in their studies, reconciles problems between home and the school; and tries to combat school drop-outs, absenteeism, and anti-social behaviour. Many informants complimented the work of the Mediator: his work was said to have enabled several Roma children to finish the compulsory grades. In addition, he has contributed to maintaining dialogue between the Roma and non-Roma.

However important his work was considered by the authorities, the monetary compensation he received was very low. The School Mediator stated he was paid only 650 RON monthly (equivalent to less than 150 EUR). He had two children studying outside Valea Seacă, at the closest high school available in the neighbouring city, whom he needed to support financially. Sustaining himself and his family would not have been feasible without him taking extra work as a musician. A few years earlier, the Mediator had been to Sweden for a few months begging and playing music on streets, earning around 300 EUR weekly. Although the living conditions were barren, people in Sweden treated him well and this money was so significant in Romanian terms as regards to his children's school fees, for example, that he was considering leaving again. All in all, it is unfortunate that the mediators' pay is so scant that it forces them to seek other options of income. In the whole Bacău County, the Valea Seacă School Mediator was the only school mediator out of the 28 he had originally trained along with to still practice his profession.

Romanian pupils do not enjoy free school lunches and only in a few schools is there school catering or a canteen. Therefore, most pupils rely on packed lunches made by their parents. This leaves some pupils in an unfavourable position compared to their peers if their parents do not have the motivation or financial means to provide their children with nutritious meals. Since 2002, the Government of Romania has implemented the *Cornul și Laptele* Programme ('Croissant and Milk'), which provides public school pupils a croissant and a milk carton on a daily basis. Directed particularly towards the disadvantaged children, the Programme ensures children get at least something to eat every school day. In Valea Seacă, where some poor families have difficulties in securing an adequate amount of food, the *Cornul și Laptele* was considered an incentive for bringing the children to school and thus a good practice in combating absenteeism.

Other positive measures identified in Valea Seacă are the *A Doua Șansă* ('the Second Chance') Programme, which enables school drop-outs to finalize their primary school later in life; and the scholarships for highly motivated pupils provided by the Roma Education Fund. The *A Doua Șansă* is being implemented for the first time in the municipality. However, there were issues with some participants having withdrawn from the programme even before it had started. Also, some informants mentioned that the scholarships are given to those who are already bright and ambitious; the weaker students are left with no incentives, which further aggravates their exclusion cycle.

Poverty paves the way for complex exclusions in regards to basic standards of living, housing, education, employment, documentation, equality and participation in the communities.



5

Key Results: Health Care

“All I want is to be with my children, close to my children.”

– Roma woman, 33 years old

Economic Deprivation and Health Insurance Issues

According to an analysis on the health situation of the Roma in seven EU member states, the main health challenges among the Romanian Roma are chronic conditions, unbalanced diet, lack of preventive health care, and insufficient health education.¹⁹ Moreover, the life expectancy of the Roma in Romania is lower than that of the non-Roma by 13 years (61.5 years compared to 74.5 years), according to a 2014 World Bank report. Roma women have a life expectancy of 62 years compared to 78 years of non-Roma women.²⁰ The same report highlights the fact that Roma suffer from worse health than non-Roma. Elderly Roma women especially “who suffer at earlier ages and more often from ill-health”²¹ are in a particularly disadvantaged position. The lack of appropriate documents by many Roma further restricts their access to health services and health care providers, which aggravates their poor health status. The consequences of the lack of adequate health care also hinder other

¹⁹ Wamsiedel and Jitariu, 2011, pp. 147–152.

²⁰ More information available at: World Bank, 2014b.

²¹ Ibid., p.152.

aspects of life, which then affect education outcomes, employability, and the general quality of life.

However, the poor health situation is first and foremost the result of economic deprivation, and the situation is similar to the non-Roma who encounter similar economic difficulties. Poverty causes social marginalization and excludes the individuals from fulfilling their basic needs: food and hygiene, and access to health care and medication.²² Romanian Roma sociologist Daniel Rădulescu argues that people who lack access to health care have scarce economic resources, disadvantageous residential location related to health services, a low level of education, and obstacles in accessing information regarding medical assistance.²³ Structural discrimination of the Roma adds to their social exclusion and economic deprivation, including lack of access to health care.

A further challenge hindering equal and universal access to health care is the citizens' mandatory contribution to the national health insurance fund. If a person has never paid his or her contribution – because of having been unemployed or having worked without a contract – he or she needs to pay retroactively for six months according to the minimum wage income, in order to have access to health care services. This is not affordable to all. Rădulescu argues that “retroactive payment to the national health insurance fund is an obstacle for Roma in accessing health services.”²⁴

Although the Romanian citizens enjoy universal health coverage and the individual contributions to

medical costs are small and free of charge for instance for the unemployed who receive social benefits, some fail to register for the insurance scheme and are thus left outside the system. The registration demands performance of formal economic activities (employment or registered business) or entitlement to use social benefits. Furthermore, those who fail to register into the health insurance scheme cannot obtain the European Health Insurance Card. This is a prevailing problem among the Romanian Roma and can have grave implications to the migrant Roma who cannot access health care services in the destination country. This is one of the reasons why there have been discussions of providing health care services in Finland also for those without proper documents²⁵.

One of the interviewed Roma women claimed she did not have money to stay in the hospital with her niece of 13 years old so she had to borrow money from loan sharks for medical bills (Roma woman, 55 years old). When a child is sick, she or he is interned in a hospital together with an adult from the family (in most of the cases, a woman from the family), who then has to pay a hospital tax (60 RON or around 15 EUR) and in many cases other informal payments for nurses and doctors. Sometimes, even basic drugs are not available in hospitals; in some situations it may be that the patients need to bring the necessary medication with them. These situations can push Roma towards other exploitative relations. Another example is from one Roma woman of 58 years old, who did not have money to pay the doctor she had

22 Rădulescu, 2014, p. 228.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., p.114.

25 More information about the Finnish discussion on providing health care services for those without proper documentation available at: Keskimäki, Kuusio and Nykänen, 2014.

The poor health situation is first and foremost the result of economic deprivation.

seen. She then had to form a negotiation with her doctor that stated that in exchange for medical services, she would do a few days of agricultural work for him.²⁶

Health of Roma Children and Women

A few days before our field visit, some children were diagnosed with hepatitis A, which is usually spread through contaminated water or food and is caused by poor hygiene and a lack of proper sanitation facilities. Therefore, in Romanian it is also known as "the dirty hands disease" (*boala mâinilor murdare*). To curb the transmission, younger children were vaccinated against hepatitis A. However, a further awareness raising campaign is needed regarding both the transmission of hepatitis and the benefits of immunization programmes. The latter is especially important since there seems to have been circulating grave misinformation related to immunization. One interviewed Roma mother stated that she refused to get her youngest child vaccinated since a young child had died in the community and the mothers linked the death to a vaccination the child had received.

One remarkable omission in the health advice of the Roma is the lack of sexual education. This is a result of an old-fashioned school curriculum combined with the traditional upbringing in many families where discussion on sexual matters is considered inappropriate, as well as the fact that the Pentecostal church that has influence over a large part of the

Roma in Valea Seacă who are members of the church takes a negative view to birth control and family planning. As a consequence, some Roma girls do not even have a rudimentary knowledge about the reproductive system. Unawareness of sexual practices can lead to early childbearing that can be life-threatening. Furthermore, girls (or boys, for that matter) are not socially or emotionally ready for parenting, in addition to which they lack the financial means to bring up a child.

Similar to the school mediator programme, Roma health mediators have been trained to liaise between the Roma community and the medical personnel since 2002. The health mediators have an important role in identifying personal solutions for the Roma who encounter problems in accessing health care services or the insurance scheme. Moreover, most of the Roma health mediators in Romania are women – one objective of the programme is to empower Roma women from different communities, but this is also because of the fact that many health problems are related to pregnancy and children's immunization (women are generally considered to carry the responsibility over children's health). Also, they encourage Roma to visit the doctor, conduct health campaigns, assist Roma who experience discrimination in accessing health care services, give health education to the communities, and gather health-related data.

²⁶ Bragă, 2014, p. 88.



The highest estimates say that there are approximately 2 million Roma people living in Romania, biggest communities numerous in Eastern Europe. Poverty and unemployment rates among the Roma is significantly higher than for the rest of the population. The Roma communities are therefore, the most important ethnic groups in regards to the pressure for social inclusion.

6

Key Results: Employment

*"I wish to work, to have money,
to have a life."*

– Roma woman, 37 years old

Unemployment, Informal Employment and Precariousness

In Romania, there is not any official comprehensive data on the situation of the Roma in the labour market; but the limited data available from surveys and studies indicates that Roma generally have a low level of (formal) employment, lower wages, and mainly non-permanent jobs. Working without contracts puts them in a state of precariousness without health, unemployment, or pension benefits. Roma women are in a worse position than Roma men. As already stated, lack of jobs and the resulting poverty were considered by all informants the main reasons for social exclusion and the need to travel abroad to earn money. Although profitable at best, going abroad is not always a pleasant choice: "I would do any job, only not to have to go abroad" (Roma woman of 33 years). Lack of employment prospects also makes the young people passive and frustrated, which might lead to anti-social behaviour.

In the communist commanded economy, Romania relied on heavy industry and agriculture that were labour intensive and provided plenty of jobs for the educated and non-educated alike. Many Roma in Valea Seacă were seasonal workers at farms and left their community to work in other parts of the country for the months from sowing to harvest. Children followed their parents so many did not have the chance to go to school, which partly explains the lack of education and the illiteracy of many Roma belonging to older generations. The conditions were harsh and the seasonal workers worked without contracts, which made them susceptible to exploitation.

However, as Andreea Bragă writes in her thesis: "The conditions for labour exploitation have changed very little over time since the younger generations still work without a contract in agriculture and without the possibility to turn to public child care services. Regarding informal employment, the life experiences of Roma women reflect the exploitative relations they are subjugated to and the inappropriate conditions not adapted to the needs of those who take care of children."²⁷ The interviewed Roma women's (as well as their daughters' and parents') work lives followed a similar pattern of working with neither a contract nor possibility to combine seasonal work with school. Moreover, their daughters were also supposed to stay at home and raise younger siblings. This situation is still prevalent today, only adapted to the phenomenon of circular migration.

Since communism fell, many state-owned enterprises and collective farms were closed and there was less work in the factories, fields and mines for the uneducated. Even those Roma who finish the secondary school still face major obstacles in finding productive formal jobs. The Roma women informants highlighted the importance of education and the fact that they cannot find a job because of that: "I don't have studies and even with studies, where do I find a job now?" (Roma woman, 33 years old).

Today, even though they have worked throughout their lives, the only sources of income for many Roma women in Valea Seacă are social benefits or days of agricultural work in the areas where they live. A day of agricultural work is informally paid with around 10 euros and three meals and the worker is normally needed for a few days, but even these job opportunities are scarce nowadays. Local farmers or landowners no longer need agricultural workers because of modern technology. Some of the Roma women make some money from selling berries or mushrooms picked from the forest nearby, but this is possible only for short periods of time during the season.

Social Assistance

The Romanian state provides various social assistance schemes for the unemployed and others in need of supplementary monetary assistance. In addition to unemployment benefits, other available social bene-

27 Ibid, p. 88.

Even the Roma who finish secondary school, they still face major obstacles in finding decent, formal jobs.

fits include family and child benefits, heating benefits during the cold period, Minimum Income Guarantee Programme targeting those at risk of poverty and social exclusion, to name but a few. The social assistance system is complex and the amount of money a person can receive depends on a number of factors; such as disability status, number of children, previous income, and property value. Therefore, this report cannot establish the minimum or average amounts of benefits the poor and unemployed can receive in Valea Seacă but anecdotal evidence suggests that social benefits are insufficient to support an adequate and predictable standard of living.²⁸

Furthermore, social assistance entails a lot of bureaucracy: one of the Roma women interviewed explained that she does not have social security because in order to prepare her application, she has to pay taxes for public legalization (*legalizare notarială*) and transport costs. This discourages her from registering for social assistance altogether. In order to get their social benefits, the unemployed in Valea Seacă need to travel to a nearby settlement every month to receive proof that they worked the number of days in community service stipulated by the social assistance scheme. Moreover, they need to visit regularly the County Employment Office (*Agenția Județeană pentru Ocuparea Forței de Muncă, AJOFM*) to check the available work offers.²⁹

Economic Security Key to Social Inclusion

The various forms of informal labour are all both very precarious and characterized by insecurity of economic stability, which makes life planning difficult. Without a work contract and steady income, many Roma could neither secure themselves a proper pension nor open bank accounts, let alone access loans. Often, this made them turn to moneylenders who charge sky-high interest rates that could lead to a circle of debt. Owners of the most flamboyant houses in Valea Seacă were thought to be loan sharks who had made their fortune out of other people's earnings.

When asked what kind of intervention would best help the situation of the unemployed and poor in the village, all authorities answered similarly: income generating undertakings and the resulting economic independence would best empower them. However, training courses for learning new skills should be accompanied by a work place or a start-up package for a micro business. A few years earlier, there had been training courses leading to construction worker and agricultural mechanic diplomas. Out of the 180 course participants roughly half were Roma. After the course, many have moved abroad and after two years, only 24 are employed. There are few jobs available in Valea Seacă even for those with qualifications. Also, as many informants mentioned, even if there were jobs available, the meagre salaries are not enough for coping with the rising cost of living. This is why many head abroad to make better earnings.

28 More information about the social assistance scheme in Romania available at: World Bank, 2014a.

29 Bragă, 2014, p. 88.



New phenomenon of migration is seasonal – the Roma leave for foreign countries for a few months and live with the earnings in their communities for a few more.

7

Key Results: Poverty and Circular Migration

*“We go abroad to survive,
we go and send money home.”*

– Roma woman, 55 years old

Impact of Roma Migration

Considering the harsh and scarce work opportunities, like seasonal agricultural work, several Roma from Valea Seacă and across Romania have migrated to the Western and Nordic countries for prospects of earning money. Although Roma work in various sectors, the most visible Roma from Romania in foreign countries are those who get their living from begging, playing music on streets, collecting bottles and other recyclable material, selling flowers, and picking berries. We met a few Roma who had been to Finland, although those going to Norway and Sweden seemed to outnumber the migrants to Finland. The informants could not tell exact numbers of the village residents who would have been abroad but generally it was estimated that the majority of the Roma had been outside Romania. A municipality representative said that “everyone who can, leaves, and only the elderly stay”.

This new phenomenon of migration is also seasonal – the Roma leave for foreign countries for a few months and live with the earnings in their communities for a few more. The money earned abroad was considered substantial in Romanian terms and it was normally used for covering everyday expenses such as food and medicine; building and refurbishing houses; financing children’s studies; buying cars; and purchasing status objects such as televisions and mobile phones. It could be seen that those Roma who had been abroad and earned money had also elevated their social status of which a modern house stood as a symbol. Although the circular and temporary migration can be hardly considered a sustainable way to solve the problems concerning social exclusion and poverty in Romania, it does have a poverty alleviating dimension.

There is a lot of information gleaned from hearsay in the public discussion in Finland and elsewhere about Roma migration. One recurring discussion is the role of human trafficking in the phenomenon: many see Roma migrants as victims of professional traffickers who collect the earnings from the beggars, flower sellers and berry pickers. However, we did not hear any allegations of human trafficking or the Roma from Valea Seacă having been forced to leave. The trip to Finland or other countries was considered an investment that paid off in most cases, even though many had to rely on high-interest loans from money-lenders.

There was a slight division in the perception among the non-Roma respondents on whether the

Roma migration to Western and Northern Europe was a positive or a negative phenomenon. Some thought it was good that the Roma brought money to the community and had a job even though it was outside Romania. However, others were concerned about the impact of begging and its side effects on the image of Romania and Romanians. They would have preferred people in other countries not to give money to beggars. Some acknowledged that the circular migration is not a sustainable solution for the poverty issues in Romania and argued that it has an adverse effect on the children who either follow their parents and cannot attend school abroad, or stay at home under the supervision of a relative or a neighbour.

Women’s Experiences Abroad

The Roma women interviewed deemed circular migration as an indispensable means of surviving. Below are some thoughts the women had on going abroad to earn money:

- "We go for 1–2 months, than we come back and survive 3 months. We are not like other Roma who are begging aggressively" (Roma woman, 39 years old). She and her family went to Sweden and after that to Finland. Her husband is ill and cannot work anymore.
- "I went abroad because I don’t have food to raise my nephews. *Țara ne-a ținut pe noi!* (The foreign country kept us alive)" (Roma woman, 55 years old).

- Two Roma women mentioned they felt treated better than in Romania: "I was in Norway for begging and there people helped me a lot. When I was sick, they took me to the hospital." (Roma woman, 43 years old).
- One of the Roma women had been going to Finland during the last 8 years. She sold flowers on the street and begged with a cup. Her husband worked in construction: "The Finnish citizens respect us; they got used to us in Finland." Moreover: "People know me in Finland, they come and talk with me and ask about my children" (Roma woman, 33 years old).

Although they met people abroad who treated them well, there were also some people who expressed themselves in an aggressive way:

- "Some of them swear us while we are begging, they say that we should go back to Romania, but if you don't answer back, they go away" (Roma woman, 33 years old).
- "I am afraid when I go abroad because somebody could beat me. It's better in our country." (Roma woman, 55 years old).

For most, going abroad is an inconvenient choice. It is not something desired because abroad the living conditions can be harsh. Moreover, they have to either leave their children behind for someone else's care or bring the children with them on the trip, both of which can be difficult decisions for a parent.



Valea Seacă is located in the Bacău County in the North-Eastern Romania. Out of the nearly 3900 people living in Valea Seacă, 1280 or roughly one third declared themselves as Roma.



8

Key Results: Housing

*“I wish we would be more civilized,
live in a proper household,
and I would live with my children.”*

– Roma woman, 43 years old

The housing situation of the Roma in Romania remains one of the most visible manifestations of the problems concerning their inclusion into wider society, and it can be characterised as insecure. The lack or inadequacy of infrastructure and access to public facilities such as water network, electricity, sewerage and garbage collection remains a critical issue and sometimes one which is also a factor predisposing to reduced health state and ability to work.

All of the Roma women that participated in the interview had similar housing conditions. Two of the women live close to the village centre and the others live near the end of the village, in an area called Pălămida. It is there that the poorest Roma families live. They live in one or two room houses with their partner, children, and sometimes their parents, and nieces and nephews. Some of the houses have electricity and the water is drawn from a well. The houses have simple furnaces for heating, but these often produce smoke and particles inside, which is why many have respiratory problems. Five of the

Roma women were older than 30 years and had over 6 children so their houses were overcrowded, two of them had 10 children. One 16 years old Roma girl had only completed primary school. Her partner was in Sweden to make money in order to build a house for them. At the time of the interview they had to live with her parents and another couple so there was not much space.

One Roma woman of 55 years old was illiterate and had 10 children, of whom most were abroad. She had to take care of her nephews, but she did not have proper living conditions and electricity. She had to borrow money from moneylenders to buy food and wood for heating: "The forest is far away from our home. We can't carry anything from there. A cart with wood is 800 RON (approx. 200 EUR)."

Lack of property documents makes Roma settlements vulnerable to evictions and can be an obstacle in accessing various public services, such as health care and education. Some of the Roma women interviewed did not have property documents since their houses were built outside planned areas. Because of this, the houses could not have electricity. In order to obtain proper documents, the houses need to be technically evaluated and introduced to the land cadastre. This should be accompanied by an entry of the legal residents' names into the cadastre for establishing ownership rights over the house. One of the priorities in the housing chapter of the National Roma Inclusion Strategy is to perform these land and property registration procedures without additional expenses for the Roma families. Also, a project focusing on this issue had been recently implemented in Valea Seacă.



The lack of identity documents is a problem that some Roma in Valea Seacă have to face. Women without identity documents face a particularly high risk of social exclusion and exploitation.

9

Key Results: Lack of Identity documents

“I wish to have identity documents for my daughter.”

– Roma girl, 16 years old

The lack of identity documents is another pressing problem that some Roma women and men in Valea Seacă have to face, implying they do not have any rights as citizens. Without any identity documents, they cannot enrol in school, or have any benefits from the public health care or social assistance, nor can they have a work contract – officially these people do not exist. Moreover, when a mother does not have documents, then her children cannot be registered either because the Romanian law provides that the mother has to be able to disclose her identity before the child can be registered. As a consequence, these children cannot benefit from public services either. This problematic situation creates multiple obstacles for Roma women who are reproducing, and strengthens inequalities that push them into extreme poverty and economic dependence on their

partners. Women without identity documents face a particularly high risk of social exclusion and exploitation.

During the field trip we met a Roma mother who had three children. She was around 30 years of age (she did not know the exact time of her birth), did not have an identity card, had never gone to school, and did not know how to read or write. The eldest son was of school age and attended school and had learnt how to read. However, since he was not registered, he just sat in the classes and could not receive official school reports. The mother also felt sorry for not being able to help her son with his homework since she could not read. At the time of our field trip, the registration process for providing identity papers for the mother was underway, however slow and bureaucratic the process was. Although the lack of identity documents is a rather rare phenomenon in Romania, this example from Valea Seacă shows that it is still a problem.

Another informant, a Roma girl of 16 years, had a child who was not registered and did not have identity documents, so she did not get any social assistance for raising her child. Therefore, she must travel abroad to earn some money so that she can then send it to Romania for her child. She has to initiate a late registration process in order to obtain identity documents for her child. This can take a long time and entails several visits to the county's court of justice.

Most of the Roma women interviewed indicated that it is better or easier to be a man than a woman. Their arguments are based on the unequal division of household responsibilities.



10

Key Results: Power Relations between Women and Men

“It’s easier to be a man than a woman, because as a man you can have a job.”

– Roma woman, 33 years old

Violence against Women

Besides inequalities that they face in terms of economic deprivation, inadequate housing, low level of education, and lack of access to health care; many Roma women from Valea Seacă are confronted by different forms of violence against women, from intimate violence and street harassment, to hate speech and structural violence. Gender roles are strongly divided in both Roma and non-Roma families in Valea Seacă, which is why there are certain patriarchal expectations in terms of the behaviour and attitudes of women.

Violence against women is a way to discipline the behaviour of women, whom do not comply with the accepted norms; or to reinforce and legitimize the power of men over women. Violence against Roma and non-Roma women, (like psychological, social, economic violence, even slapping, kicking or punching) is tolerated and frequently encountered.

Only extreme physical violence (beating with a stake or chain, breaking bones, leaving unconscious, stabbing, for instance) is perceived as gender based violence. Not all forms of violence, such as economic; social; or psychological violence stipulated in the legislation are perceived as gender-based violence. The traditionalist patriarchy overlaps religious patriarchy, and gender inequality is perceived as biologically determined and not socially constructed; which strengthens the resistance to change of status quo and disprove any action of contestation on behalf of women.³⁰

Most of the Roma women interviewed indicated that it is better or easier to be a man than a woman. Their arguments are based on the unequal division of household responsibilities:

- "Every woman lives a hard life because of the household responsibilities: she has to cook and clean and do everything" (Roma woman, 39 years old).
- "It's easier to be a man than a woman because men shift off responsibility and leave, they don't know what it means to purchase and prepare food, to take care of the children" (Roma woman, 43 years old).

30 Ibid, p. 117.

The various systems of subordination and dependency that Roma women experience simultaneously unveil the way in which inequalities create extra obstacles. Patriarchal constructions of the unequal power relations between women and men in the case of interviewed Roma women are similar as well to the relations of non-Roma women and men.³¹

Early Sexual Relations

One of the school representatives emphasised boys' demeaning attitudes toward girls and the fact that some boys start to harass the girls sexually at a very young age. Absence of any sexual education in the mandatory curriculum and the perception of sexuality as a taboo subject is translated into a lack of information regarding sexual and reproductive rights, and the meaning of consent in sexual intercourse. One young Roma woman of 17 years old has a child of 2 years and she mentioned that her partner forced her to have sexual contact. In some cases sexual contact symbolically validates the union between Roma partners, which is how relationships between adolescents that involve sexual intercourse, become in many cases early marriages.

31 Ibid, p. 173.

Without a comprehensive qualitative research, analysis of early marriages in Roma community from Valea Seacă can strengthen negative prejudices towards Roma and legitimize the social distance between the non-Roma and Roma, which is why it

is important not to generalize to the entire community. On the other hand, it is also important not to apply double standards. For example, the authorities should treat equally all cases where their intervention is needed.





11

Recommendations

Drawing from the interviews and field trip impressions, we have a few recommendations to be considered when designing the actual project. These recommendations are drafted with the full understanding that some issues, such as illiteracy; endemic poverty and unemployment; illiteracy; women's inferior position in the community; and issues pertaining to household and identity documentation require strong involvement from the authorities and structural changes in the society. Tackling these issues is therefore outside the scope of the Helsinki Deaconess Institute project.

Furthermore, since the issues related to social exclusion and poverty are complex and manifold, the objectives of the project should be kept realistic and achievable. Therefore, the project is not expected to address all recommendations.

The project should include non-formal education on human rights – accentuating the importance of combating racism and sexism, combating different forms of violence against women, sexual and reproductive rights, and information on the right to non-discriminatory and adequate housing.

- The design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the project should be based on the Valea Seacă's Roma and non-Roma women's perspectives, descriptions and needs in regards to marginalisation and community initiative needs.
- In the design process, other actors in the municipality should be involved and consulted. These include the Roma School and Health Mediators, school and municipality authorities, religious leaders and other relevant members of the community. The leverage of the Pentecostal church over the majority of the Roma in Valea Seacă needs to be taken into close consideration.
- Cooperation and complementarity with other civil society initiatives need to be assessed.
- The Helsinki Deaconess Institute has developed and implemented successfully participatory and inclusive community methods both in Southern Africa and the Wider Europe region. Getting inspiration from these methods in Valea Seacă should be considered for enhancing women's empowerment and social cohesion within and between different communities in Valea Seacă.
- The focus of the project should be on sustainable development and empowerment. However, in order to secure the involvement of Roma and non-Roma women in this project, some incentives (for instance, some sort of in-kind contribution) should be considered. The Helsinki Deaconess Institute has positive experiences in providing food as an incentive for participation. Also, common meal times offer a good informal setting for socializing between the participants.
- Also, when providing activities for parents, there should be activities that take place at the same time for their children (otherwise they might not be able to participate).
- Young Roma should be provided training on basic life skills including parenting skills. These training sessions could include some forms of sexual and health education. Alternative methods, such as drama workshops could be useful in this regard.
- The project should include non-formal education on human rights – accentuating the importance of combating racism and sexism, combating different forms of violence against women, sexual and reproductive rights, and information on the right to non-discriminatory and adequate housing.
- Given the difficulty of finding sustainable employment in the current economic climate and its alarming consequences for the unemployed and the society as whole, creating job opportunities particularly for young people should be considered.

Annex

List of Interviewees and the Interview Protocol

The names of the Roma women are not disclosed here to protect their privacy.

The list of interviewees among the public authorities and service providers group included:

1. the Mayor, Mr. Ion Pravăț
2. the Director of the Valea Seacă Elementary School No.1 (classes I–VII), Mr. Silviu Pravăț
3. the Municipality Social Assistant, Ms. Laura Abălașei
4. the Roma Health Mediator, Ms. Lăcrimioara Călin
5. the Roma School Mediator, Mr. Laver Călin
6. the Teacher of the Valea Seacă Primary School No. 3 (classes I–IV), Ms. Doina Atomei
7. the Teacher of the Valea Seacă Primary School No. 3, Ms. Ioana Vlaicu
8. the Nursery School Teacher of the Valea Seacă Primary School No. 3, Ms. Lenuța Vătămanu
9. the Deacon of the local Pentecostal church, Mr. Vasile Cantaragiu.

Some of the key questions for the public authorities were:

1. What are the specific challenges Roma, especially Roma women encounter in your community/ municipality?
2. Do you know any measures, programmes or policies adopted by the EU, the Council of Europe or the Romanian Government in order to combat these challenges?
3. How has the socio-economic situation of the Valea Seacă residents, especially the Roma, evolved after the 1989 Revolution?
4. How would you describe the inter-ethnic relations between the Roma and non-Roma in the municipality?
5. What do you consider would be the relevant interventions to tackle the particular challenges the Roma, especially Roma women, face?
6. What do you think would be the realistic results of this kind of project focusing the Roma women's empowerment?

Some of the key questions for Roma women from Valea Seacă were:

1. Could you please tell me some basic information about yourself (name, age, education, income, number of children)?
2. Could you please tell me about the challenges the Roma women from Valea Seacă face (lack of ID documents, health, education, labour, social welfare, housing, family life, etc.)? Which do you think it is better to be, a Roma or a non-Roma? Why? A woman or a man? Why? A Roma woman or a non-Roma woman? Why?
3. Have you ever felt you were treated differently because you are a Roma? How about because you are a woman? Have anyone made racist remarks about you? In what context?
4. Do you feel safe in your house? How about on the street in Valea Seacă? At night? If you have issues considering your safety, what should be done to tackle these issues? Who do you think is responsible for the situation?
5. Have you encountered problems in relation to different institutions (hospital, social assistance, school, labour, police)? Do you know any person (Roma/non-Roma, woman/man) in Valea Seacă who would have encountered these problems?
6. Have you ever been in another country in order to assure a better life? How is it different from the life you have in Romania? Is it better or worse?
7. What kind of life do you wish for your children? How do you want their life to be different from yours?

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