

## Gender equality for Roma communities

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"The project has helped to develop strong female leaders in marginalised Roma communities who are capable of coordinating other women in their community. This can be considered the biggest success of the project so far," according to project manager Natalia Kotulakova.

Mother and daughter



The project activities are based on the real needs of Roma women formulated in their "own voices," explains project manager Natalia Kotulakova. (Photo: Peter Vološčuk, People in Need)

### About the project

The project "[Gender equality for Roma communities](#)" is primarily concerned with raising awareness of gender equality among women in Roma communities through educational activities and campaigns, with the goal of empowering Roma women and girls with their rights, dignity and points of view.

"The ambition of the project is to achieve a positive change in the perception of gender equality among people from marginalised Roma communities and to improve the situation of Roma women and girls in selected communities," writes Kotulakova in an email.

The main part of the project consists of educational activities, campaigns and support activities organised for Roma girls and women in selected communities, with the aim of increasing their awareness of gender equality.

See also: [Upcoming conference: How to ensure Roma women's rights to be free from violence?](#)

### Activities to empower women, parents and youngsters

The project includes an information campaign, co-created with Roma children and women, that is designed to support the dignity of Roma women with creative outcomes, such as a colourful wall calendar with the portraits of important Roma artists, and a card game. In addition, workshops will take place at primary and secondary schools that focus on eliminating gender stereotypes and the obstacles faced by Roma women.

The project activities are based on the real needs of Roma women formulated in their "own voices," Kotulakova writes.

The project offers Roma women the opportunity to meet regularly in female support groups in community centres, where they choose what they want to talk about and share with others. The community coordinators use didactic games and books to help initiate discussions.

"Support groups help Roma women realise that they are free to express their feelings and opinions, and that their voice should be valued in the community" writes Kotulakova. (More information about support groups in the fact box).

There are other groups dedicated to Roma mothers, fathers and parents with small children. The aim is to strengthen their parenting skills, to support understanding between women and men, and to strengthen intergenerational bonds in order to stimulate and motivate children for a better future.

"The common thread that runs through these support groups is the visibility of Roma women, friendships being developed, and the breaking of stereotypes," writes Kotulakova, and adds "especially stereotypes about the myth that parenthood is motherhood, about female (un)friendship, and religious faith being an obstacle to gender equality."

A healthy dose of self-confidence and the power of women groups can positively affect the whole of family life, but this also presents a big challenge – new life strategies can sometimes be met with resistance from the wider family

## Creative activities to promote gender equality

The project activities dedicated to raising awareness about gender equality and eliminating gender stereotypes are not exclusively educational – they also feature a creative element. In the project "[Roma women you \(don't know\)](#)", children from a local art school drew and illustrated portraits of interesting and prominent Roma women, including a composer, a violinist, a singer, a dancer, an artist and a jeweller, as well as an activist, a scientist, a translator, a teacher and a doctor, and their life stories were described on a colourful wall calendar.

Chemist Natalia Pankova (1924 – 1991), illustrated in the wall calendar. (Screenshot)

The wall calendar is used in talks and discussions in community centres to inspire other Roma women to be ambitious and to overcome the difficulties they face in their

own lives.

In addition to the wall calendar, a card game quartet called "Women without borders" was also created. The fun game introduces 32 female activists who fought for freedom and equality for their nation but then found that their own rights were denied because they were women.

"It serves as inspiration for women from excluded communities to find their own voice and strength and become aware of gender equality", writes Kotulakova, and adds "it shows women that they do have a place in society and are capable of changing their lives for the better."

## Integrating people from marginalised Roma communities

The project promoter "[People in Need](#)" is an organisation that aims to help people in need, not only in Slovakia but worldwide. Their efforts are oriented towards humanitarian help, development cooperation, human rights, global education and social inclusion. Their social inclusion programme is primarily focused on the social integration of people from marginalised Roma communities, through education, employment and housing, via community centres.

"The clients with whom they work have been forced to overcome many obstacles in their lives, ever since childhood. Gender disparity is very common in the marginalised Roma community and it impacts women's ability to receive and complete a proper education. This affects their ability to get work, and there is a high birth rate, poor hygiene conditions for mothers, inadequate healthcare, and exposure to violence from their partners and families," Kotulakova explains.

"This project offers talks and workshops about gender equality for primary and secondary schools, in which such topics as human and female rights, the status of Roma women, and how gender equality can eliminate violence against women, are presented and discussed" writes Kotulakova.

## Success criteria: strong female leaders and important collaborators

There have been two collaborating NGOs from Slovakia. They are "[EsFem](#)", which works with gender equality and the support of female rights, and the organisation "Equal Chances", which helps prepare pre-school Roma children for their primary education and motivates parental support for their children's education," Kotulakova explains.

*What pitfalls and successes have there been in this project?*

"The project has helped to develop strong female leaders in marginalised Roma communities who are capable of coordinating other women. This can be considered the biggest success of the project so far."

Roma women are the driving force in their communities, as they spend the most time taking care of children and their family. However, they only have a limited amount of time to attend to their own needs. Kotulakova informs us that in the first phase of the project it was important to offer Roma women safe and creative environments where they could relax, chat and build mutual trust while doing handicraft and embroidery.

"In the beginning, it was obvious that the women were not used to talking about themselves and sharing their joys or

problems, as they were used to focusing on the practicalities of everyday life. Open discussions were something new to them, it was clear that speaking about different topics was a novelty and they often felt surprised, and unsure about what to say” Kotulakova explains.

The women have gradually opened up and started to share their feelings, and to ask for advice about other topics. It was important for them to take the initiative and immensely satisfying to receive appreciation from the group. It has helped them to become more proactive and confident and they have started to communicate more openly.

"A healthy dose of self-confidence and the power of women groups can positively affect the whole of family life, but this also presents a big challenge – new life strategies can sometimes be met with resistance from the wider family," writes Kotulakova, and adds:

"Thanks to the educational workshops in schools and community centres, not only are the pupils confronted with their own prejudices towards the Roma people, but Roma children can also acquaint themselves with their own history and appropriate role models, and learn about the value gender equality can have in their own lives”.

*In what way has the Synergy Network been an important tool for combating domestic and gender-based violence?*

"Synergy is a platform that allows various countries to exchange their experience and best practices for tackling domestic and gender-based violence. It enables relevant stakeholders to learn from each other and is a useful tool for strengthening the network between the participating countries," writes Kotulakova.

*This project article is reported by **Natalia Kotulakova**, project manager in Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic (The programme operator).*

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