ENGAGE – USING CONTACT INTERVENTIONS TO PROMOTE ENGAGEMENT AND MOBILISATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

# Roma Activism

## Summary report of the interviews with Roma activists in three countries – Hungary, Slovakia and Spain

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## Executive summary

*Based on 32 interviews with Roma activists in Slovakia, Hungary and Spain:*

- Negative attitudes and discrimination of Roma people were primary motives for activist to start their work.
- Activism is considered necessary in the hostile environment, but extreme connotations of activism made it difficult for some to identify with the activist label.
- Role models and work of non-governmental organizations inspired participants to become activists.
- NGOs play a crucial role in activism, but they also face challenges related to financial and staff instability.
- Main barriers to activism are: paternalistic attitudes; the persisting negative image; low representation; poor awareness of Roma history, culture and identity.
- Roma women are crucial carriers of change, nevertheless, their low representation and gender stereotypes create additional obstacles, the urge to support and empower Roma girls and women were recognized.
- Good allyship, as an indispensable part of any social change, means: willingness to listen, participate and learn, stand up for the cause, and give space to Roma.

## Introduction and Objectives

In the **ENGAGE** project, social psychologists, sociologists and social intervention professionals who work in the field of anti-Gypsyism and Roma empowerment in three European countries (Hungary, Slovakia and Spain), meet with the objective and the commitment to contribute so that the different stakeholders can successfully deal with anti-Gypsyism, as well as understand and promote the factors involved in raising awareness and mobilization of Roma people and non-Roma as allies for the achievement of a more egalitarian social change.

**MINORITY ACTIVISM** is an important vehicle of social change aiming at reducing structural inequalities and improving intergroup relations. It is often the sustainable effort of Roma activists that have contributed to ameliorating the living conditions and social status of the Roma minority. Therefore, it is important to better understand the potential of activism as well as barriers it faces. Along with other project activities (for example identifying best practice examples of contact interventions) we decided to explore more broadly and deeply the role of Roma activism.

Over the past three decades, the emergence of Romani activism has been an important development accompanying political changes in Central and Eastern Europe. The origins of

the international struggle for the self-determination of Roma can be traced back at least to the 1960s, when the United Nations inspired the creation of several Romani organisations to promote the interests of the world's Roma through UN instruments and structures (Kóczé & Rövid, 2012). Since then, many national and international non-governmental organisations (further as NGOs) and the global civil society have been involved in the struggle against the discrimination of Roma (Kóczé & Rövid, 2012). The role of NGOs as tools for social change is important as they advocate the government responsiveness for Roma people (Dnyanved, 2017).

While pro-Roma global civil society plays a crucial role in raising awareness of the marginalisation of Roma, "white NGOs" (organisations led by and employing predominantly non-Roma persons) and pro-Roma actors often patronise Roma in their desire to help them that could neutralise the natural mechanisms of community preservation, thus turning the community into a constant social customer of professional benefactors (Marushiakova & Popov, 2004). Replacing or outweighing Roma NGOs and activists can result in further marginalisation and demobilisation of the Roma community (Kóczé & Rövid, 2012). Professional NGOs dominate pro-Roma civil society, often speaking in the name of 'Roma', while grassroots Romani associations remain weak and fragmented (Kóczé & Rövid, 2012), can be poorly organised and have difficulty getting along with each other – in large part because of their competition for scarce resources (Bárány, 2002). Moreover, non-governmental organizations and Roma institutions, who are dependent on and supported by external donors, do not have any significant influence on national policy (Law & Kovats, 2018).

McGarry and Agarin (2014) list three consecutive forms of participation through which effective policies can be reached: participation as *presence*, participation as *voice*, and participation as *influence*. Participation as presence (representation, higher visibility of Roma) is a first step to achieve effective participation but could be linked to some forms of tokenism. Participation as a voice emphasizes the need to create institutional structures that give space to the participation of Roma people and act as a speaker for their needs. Finally, participation as influence emphasizes the active participation of Roma civil society in the shaping of Roma policies and their implementation (McGarry & Agarin, 2014).

The rise of Roma politics after the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies elevated the group and brought about the creation of the Roma identity as a dynamic and transformative political concept for the identity of a certain people - a people that are not only diverse, empowered, and finally recognized by authorities, but a people who are also in need of constant support (Law & Kovats, 2018). Although Eastern European governments produced 'Roma strategies' as a sign of political commitment to fight Roma discrimination, in the daily lives of Roma little has changed (Kóczé & Rövid, 2012). Contemporary Roma leaders benefit from the huge increase in resources from Roma projects (Surdu & Kovats, 2015). Europeanisation provides an extra dimension to Roma exclusion by moving responsibility for overcoming barriers to social mobility away from national governments and towards the

European level, and from national politicians to civil society actors such as NGOs (Rövid, 2011; van Baar, 2012). The tendency to put "Roma issues" under an economic rationale has come to override the human rights perspective (Friedman, 2014). Therefore, among Roma the level of trust in European Roma projects and in NGOs themselves is generally low, a common opinion being that these organisations benefit from their difficulties' (Rostas, 2009). Dnyanved (2017) for example highlights the importance of NGOs as tools for social change, although it is necessary to differentiate between service delivery agencies (like 'churches and service clubs') and NGOs which advocate government responsiveness for Roma people. The latter would be those that contribute to social change.

The number of Roma activists is small. They face the challenge to mobilise others (both Roma and non-Roma allies) and struggle of publicly identifying as Roma, as they have to deal with prejudice and hostility (Law & Kovats, 2018). An increasing interest of minority women to engage in the third sector can be observed, as they realize that action is needed to improve their situation (Emejulu & Bassel, 2015). This also applies to Roma women, who until recently had less scope for involvement in supporting their community. It turns out that Roma women cannot avoid activism if they want to free themselves from experiencing various injustices, despite the lack of support from Roma men (Daróczi et al., 2018).

Roma activism has its own "double jeopardy" which means that emphasizing the Roma identity is inevitable to mobilise people, but it increases the chance of self-exclusion. McGarry (2011) claims that the transnational aspect of the Roma identity is driven by the Roma elites but is hardly understood by those Roma who anchor their citizenship in the national political context. Being generally the elite who takes part in activism, it is also questionable whether they can represent the whole, highly diverse ethnic group. However, the Roma communities represent poverty and exclusion, the lowest number of Roma coming from these communities are present in politics and activism, therefore Romani communities in many cases do not support the Romani representatives active in the outside world (Law & Kovats, 2018). The political mobilisation and participation of Roma people can be successfully reached by a training programme which creates a net of Roma who could exchange experiences and skills so subsequently they would be capable to address the issues of the communities better (Hrustič, 2018).

Roma activists face challenges in connection to allies. Allies are people who, even not belonging to the disadvantaged group, are informed about the problem and participate in the fight against inequality faced by that group giving them support (Kutlaca et al., 2020; Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Curtin, Kende and Kende (2016) highlight that the mobilization of ally activists could be based on similar identity processes as the mobilization of in-group activists. Organizations can therefore attract allies to join their causes by highlighting the structural aspects of the collective disadvantages they are fighting to change, and strengthen the importance of intersectional rather than singular identities of both in-group members and allies. Daróczi et al. (2018) identified many challenges feminist Roma women face to promote

transformative change: direct discrimination; manipulative patronage; lack of self-critical understanding and support by non-Roma; failures of solidarity within the wider Romani movement but also among Romani women; lack of funding; the pressures of survival in neoliberal economies; and pressures to undertake individual activist initiatives without support.

There is broad psychosocial evidence that positive intergroup contact improves intergroup attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). It has been shown how the experiences of contact (direct or indirect) with members of disadvantaged social groups are related to less prejudice and negative emotions towards the members of these groups, as well as, in some cases, with greater support for egalitarian policies (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Recent research shows that, while positive contact can improve attitudes, it can also reduce the commitment and mobilization of minority groups to defend their rights (e.g., Becker et al., 2013 ; Hässler et al., 2020; Wright & Lubensky, 2009). Although members of advantaged groups have more resources to change existing intergroup relations, social change cannot be achieved without the participation of disadvantaged groups (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). However, the real engagement of minorities may be low due to the coping strategies offered by the belief in a just world (Stroebe, 2013) and justifying the system (Jost & Kay, 2005). Members of low-status groups may manifest self-stereotyping mechanisms, they may distance themselves from the victimized identity (Giroud et al., 2021) or adopt essentialist views. This can prevent them from participating in collective action on behalf of their own group and fighting for social change. To change structural inequalities, members of disadvantaged groups can 'engage' in a number of responses when they experience inequalities - some resign themselves to their fate, some try to improve their personal situation (e.g., by individual social mobility), while others might attempt to improve the position of the group as a whole (i.e., collective action; see Ellemers et al., 1993). Collective actions (Wright et al., 1990) are one of the ways to change social inequalities and discrimination. These are actions to improve the conditions of socio-economic inequality conducted through actions as participating in protests, creating political parties or movements, or signing petitions advocating for social change.

The **OBJECTIVE** of this task was therefore to:
1. Explore activists' experiences and perspectives on activism.
2. Discuss the questions of contact interventions (best practice examples).
3. Focus on issues of allyship and mobilisation for social change.

# Methods

## Procedure

In the autumn and winter 2021/2022 we conducted thirty-two interviews, online or in person, with Roma activists from the three participating countries. Each participant consented to engaging in the interview. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and subsequently coded.

**The criteria for inclusion into the sample were**:
- to be a Roma person with an experience in activism of more than one year;
- the person has to consistently pursue activities with/for the Roma community;
- the person does not need to identify with the role of activist (but it was preferable);
- diversity of the sample (in terms of age, gender, length of experience, area and level of activism, etc.).

## Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, coding primarily explicit meanings of participants and being open to new emerging topics throughout the process. In parallel, researchers also used notes or memos to capture any important issues in the activist's journey that would have been otherwise overlooked.

The analysis primarily focused on **5 topics**:
1. Activists´ Journey
2. Activists' identification with and perception of activism
3. Broader context of activism
4. Best Practice and its barriers
5. Allyship

# Data

## Sample description

The sample in all three countries was satisfactorily diverse in terms of gender, age, country region, level of activism (local, regional, national, European), length of activist´s experience and area of activism. In all three countries, our participants were active in the following areas: education, law, academia, arts, social work; having experience as a "solo" activist, activist of non-governmental or governmental organization or local political representatives.

| Country | Interviews - number (form) | Women | Men | Length of the interviews (minutes) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hungary | 10 (online) | 7 | 3 | 37 - 82 |
| Slovakia | 12 (online and offline) | 8 | 4 | 60 - 120 |
| Spain | 10 (online and offline) | 5 | 5 | 42 - 116 |
| TOTAL | 32 | 20 | 12 | |

## Results

### Activists´ Journey

**Routes to activism:** Roma activists that participated in the study came from various communities and backgrounds (low socio-economic status and middle class) and therefore their experience with discrimination had been different. For many, **the motivation to become an activist** drew from their perception of the social injustice and the need to improve the situation of Roma people. Here a participant explains her journey of realizing that the changes she wished for her children and family actually apply also to the Roma community, as well as broader society. She felt she wanted to become a part of the solution:

" *And all that is needed is to come out of my bubble and the problems that various other Roma families and the children are experiencing, that actually the problems there start to be more acute (...) that was the original reason [for becoming an activist]. That actually, it was really primarily about me, my family, my loved ones and the children that I saw around me in that community and the realization that it wasn't happening AROUND me and that I was actually PART OF IT. And if I slip into saying, well, it doesn't concern me… [that would be bad].* (Participant 9, Slovakia)

There were also participants who were raised in communities where Roma people were not targets of discrimination and only later they experienced a harsher way of being othered - for example being the only Roma in their (high school or university) class in the. Becoming aware of the unfair inequality of opportunities for the Roma either first-hand or indirectly, and learning more about social and civil movements supporting the situation of other minorities, motivated them to react. The following participant describes an "eye-opening" experience:

" *When I was a child, I did not know what discrimination was… I had the best grades in my class. We were poor, but almost everyone was poor in the village, so maybe seeing that this can be done without any discrimination, that a school can be organized without discrimination… also pushed me [to become an activist] … I was the only Roma in the high school for years… so I thought I will do my best not to be the only Roma student in a school.* (Participant 8, Hungary)

The role models were a great **source of inspiration** to become an activist. These were mainly strong figures in the activists' lives such as parents or close relatives (often activists themselves); those important to the community; people from formal or informal education – a teacher, a university professor, a mentor supporting them in their studies, inspiring people they met at trainings; or members of NGOs whose work was focused on minorities, human rights and so on.

The role of different non-governmental (and sometimes governmental) organizations was perceived as **crucial in the activists´ journey**. NGOs either provided essential training in the beginning of their career, a job opportunity, or activists experienced fruitful cooperation with them, they admired the work of organizations advocating for Roma rights and improving their status. Sometimes unexpected moments like finding out a specific training in which they saw a great potential for changing inter-group relations proved to be inspirational. Activists appreciated activities, interventions, scientific or academic meetings where they have been able to create contacts and networks with other Roma activists. Such occasions subsequently helped them to create other interventions or grow (personally or professionally) in some aspects, emancipate from public institutions, and also be more autonomous actors for social change.

" *I have many memories of many international meetings in which I've been, in some meetings at the national level that have nurtured me from a network of friends that I wouldn't have known otherwise. If these types of spaces have had something good, (…) you meet people and then you organize things that have nothing to do with institutions.* (Participant 2, Spain)

**Barriers:** The barriers activists faced throughout their journey were manifold. They often faced expressions of anti-Gypsyism, some even had to deal with arrests due to "ethnic profiling" (Spain) meaning when a person looks like Roma they are more likely to be arrested by police (the stereotypical image of Roma is associated with criminality). On a less personal level, the barriers to Roma activism also lie in the poor acknowledgement of Roma history and culture in the three countries. The activists perceived it was necessary to intervene and raise awareness since childhood at educational spaces but, in their experience, many attempts in education end up jeopardised by the poor acknowledgement of Roma identity and culture (by both non-Roma and Roma) which further deepens the stereotypical and negative image about Roma:

" *[Speaking of the school] Many non-Roma people are unaware of history. They don't understand why there is such a big gap. We have been recognized as citizens with full rights since 1978 and in the 1980s we began to go to school. There is a lack of sensitivity and knowledge of the culture, they speak from their prejudices, but not from [the knowledge of] history.* (Participant 10, Spain)

Participants also described several instances where their voice as Roma was not given equal (or adequate) value – they feel Roma are not equal partners in the implementation of public policies; similarly civic associations are not good enough partners for local governments; activists get invited to events such as conferences as part of common audience instead of being

assigned the role of a panel speaker; moderators in media omit inviting a Roma to comment on a topic that concerns the Roma minority.

## Activists' identification with and perception of activism

The participants have described a wide range of **different perceptions of activism** whether it was their own or others' view on what activism is, who activists are or how they behave. Participants also mentioned different forms, levels of activism and that diversity in perception of activism, in fact, can be viewed as a benefit:

> *Activism can be at many levels, there is activism for the Roma language, there is activism against anti-Gypsyism, there is Roma LGTB activism, there is Roma feminist activism… In other words, it is enough to see Roma in a group or "in one box". Diversity is not a privilege only of the majority society.* (Participant 5, Spain)

Some made the observation that activism may change over the years. The current activism is more present on social networks than "in the street". The following participant describes a scale from direct to indirect forms of activism:

> *It is an umbrella term. Those who lock themselves to a nuclear reactor, they are activists, and those who create a Facebook page with some thousands views and draw attention to social issues, they are activists too.* (Participant 3, Hungary)

The perceptions of activism are related to the participants'' **identification with activism**. While in Spain all participants identified with being an activist, in Hungary and Slovakia we have observed more instances where the identification was only partial, conditional or even that the activist refused this label (being aware others might still perceive them as activist anyway).

Participants highlighted different perceptions of activism from the part of other (common) people in the sense of political and youth movements, even a pejorative understanding of activism. Some tried to distance themselves from the image of a "radical" activist who screams and shouts, or imposes opinions on other people. Here, a participant explains her hesitation to be viewed as one of them and at the same time she questions the stereotype of poor Roma begging for help. Instead, she presents the activist role in creating opportunities for the community.

> *…during those years around 2000 - 2005, when the word "activist" started to be derogatory, I found out that I don't agree with those people who consider themselves Roma activists and say this about themselves. And that I don't actually want to be put in that category with them. (They) said that these poor Roma people need to be helped, and you know how badly off they are, and so on. And I didn't identify with that at all. Because I was convinced that it wasn't about helping them, it was about creating opportunities.* (Participant 9, Slovakia)

For some, the identification was difficult due to other group memberships, bringing their activism to an intersectional area (a "Roma feminist activist") or they found it complicated because there was an overlap between their jobs and activism:

" *It is always hard [to define myself]. … I am a Roma person, yes, and I am an activist as well in many respects. … It is also a job for me, more formal than just being an activist, but I define myself as an activist in many other respects too. … It is hard to get these things apart: if you are working for an NGO, this is part of your everyday life. … But I find these things [social issues] important even as an ordinary citizen or a private person."* (Participant 1, Hungary)

Some participants felt reserved or hesitant about people who take activism as a paid job and not a mission. Being an activist "on a payroll" puts them in danger of feeling obliged to submit to the preferences and opinions of their employer which is in the contrast with an activist as a personal, private role where one is free to express even uncomfortable facts about the situation of Roma people. Some interpreted the term in a broader sense meaning all those who try to improve the situation of the Roma can be called activists:

" *…those who do anything for the Roma, on any levels, anywhere.* (Participant 9, Hungary)

For most of the participants it was easier to explain **what makes them activists, what activism and its goal should be** rather than clearly defining the concept. Here, we summarize their opinions.

Being a Roma activist means:

- fighting against injustice;
- claiming the rights of the Roma;
- protecting human rights of socially disadvantaged;
- striving for Roma community to be treated equally and perceived positively;
- efficiently self-represent and self-organize the Roma community;
- questioning the social hierarchy currently established in their country;
- making effort to explain (in the contrast with a "militant activist" who wants others to conform to his image);
- being committed to change the living conditions of others.

Roma activism:

- inspires people not to be passive about what is happening in society, awakens them, inspires them to pose questions for themselves;
- empowers people;
- changes the situation of the Roma by achieving equal opportunities in education, in their working conditions, and in their political representation;
- reduces hatred toward Roma, lowers discrimination of the Roma;
- addresses poverty;
- is supposed to create bridges.

" *[Activism means to]... teach the Roma community to make stand up for themselves.* (Participant 8, Hungary)

Although defining activism or identifying with its various forms may have been challenging for some, the participants were strongly convinced that Roma activism is necessary and needed in the society we live in. Although in the beginning they eagerly tried to change the system, for many, their objectives and goals must have been modified due to the social reality or funding limits they experienced.

Also, the short-term and long-term goals of activism may differ, but ultimately the long run the goal is to have a strong, stable Roma youth community with a proper public or political presence, with publicly recognized young Roma people, with Roma women who take public roles.

## Broader context of activism

The success of any of activists' work is embedded in and depends on the broader context of activism. In this part we summarize our participants´ experience of the broader political, societal, and local contexts of activism as well as the reaction to their work.

Roma minority in all three countries, Hungary, Slovakia and Spain, experience **negative attitudes from the part of majority**, therefore most of Roma women and men face discrimination. We identified multiple instances where participants reflected the fact that the negative image of Roma people is still embedded in society and it creates barriers to pursuing daily lives, to engaging in activism or carrying out interventions. Here, a Hungarian participant describes the way negative attitudes, also expressed by those holding the positions of power, may affect daily work of teachers and social workers in cases when they observe a discriminatory behaviour towards Roma:

" *...a schoolteacher will not say that 'OK, for me it is enough' and [instead] will use self-censorship and will silence themselves... a teacher has not got a strong financial security, could be fired... the same goes for social workers that also stay quiet and do nothing... if they and the power holders do not let us do proper work, then I do not know what could happen in the future.* (Participant 6, Hungary)

Sometimes they witnessed a paradoxical situation (court´s ruling against segregation practices in Czech Republic) when Roma parents rather decided to board their children into a special school (school for children with special needs, usually with mental disorder) in order to avoid racist comments in regular school environment:

" *... the court ruled that parent's wishes do not justify discrimination, right? Which is ,like, right, but at the same time then the question is – are we supposed to tell parents which school they should put their kids in, right? Just like, I know it's better for the kid, but then again, the kid comes home and [says that] somebody called him a racist slur and, so what - he comes to that parent, not to me. And that parent is supposed to tell that child that no, no, no, you're not attending that school where it's all Roma and*

*nobody's going to call you names, you're going to go to that school where they're going to call you names because this man said it's better."* (Participant 1, Slovakia)

One participant felt the adverse circumstances create situations in lives of the Roma which, at some point, force them to participate as activists since they need to fight the system that continually questions them and dictates that "being Roma" is something negative:

" *All the Roma have something of activists and of reacting to a system that is not kind to them at all. And then, when you publicly declare yourself to be a Roma activist, it has its controversial part, because you are seen as always controversial. (…) The challenge is making the Roma people recognize that they themselves do activism almost every day.* (Participant 2, Spain)

Once a person of Roma origin does not fit the (negative) stereotypical image, they are perceived as merely an exception. The phenomenon of "**the exception which proves the rule**" was experienced frequently by many Roma activists. Also, some activists in Spain affirmed contra-stereotypical Roma are not considered as "real Roma", but rather as "moulded Roma" (those who are accused of working more for the institutions than for the Roma people). Several participants from Slovakia, especially those who came from better socio-economic backgrounds or over the years acquired a higher status, experienced instances of "**double jeopardy**" - Roma people did not feel the activists represented them well. Roma communities are diverse, and being an activist or a public figure one cannot possibly represent all Roma people in the country, which inevitably creates the gap.

" *[Roma] they were very happy that it was me, they felt that I was an educated person, I never had any conflicts with anyone (…). But then they actually expected me to present my Romaniness [Roma identity] more. That I would be more of an activist, that I would shout more or, yes. But only that I did it in a form that they did not expect, that they did not appreciate, right? In other words, we only made materials, we wrote government materials."* (Participant 3, Slovakia)

Overall, our participants experienced **positive reactions to their work** - from the Roma community as well as from non-Roma they have had contact with; and groups they encounter are grateful for their work. The interviewees had the perception of having helped, to a greater or lesser extent. Some sensed that the positive feedback is secure in their "own bubble", but they realise that activism entails barriers and difficulties in making changes in a broader societal context. Sometimes, it takes time to gain the trust from the people they work with. Although the activist work seems difficult, participants think that progress has been made in the countries.

The participants repeatedly mentioned **non-governmental organizations** positively, as carriers of the social change. The organizations perform good work locally, and some bigger ones are also well known nationally. In Slovakia, NGOs were perceived as sources of inspiration to activists and representatives of good practice. NGOs usually face challenges of under-financing, financial and personal instability or simply being under-sized. On the other hand, we registered instances of negative experiences. In Spain, an institutionalization of social movements was implemented by NGOs and associations that receive more economic funds

from the state than others. Part of the activism is therefore perceived as limited due to the effort of "not to annoy" the government in order to maintain financing. In Slovakia, activists complained about those organizations with the majority of employees of non-Roma origin and were very dissatisfied with growing practices of organizations or individuals becoming "professional activists"- meaning those whose only purpose is to raise money from the funds without proper cause, ethics or practice.

The interviewed activists in the three countries agreed that **both the academic and the political representation** of the Roma community is very low and the **participation of Roma,** although present, is still problematic.

In Slovakia, there is a lack of Roma representatives both in education (for example university professors) and in political representation (for example mayors or local council members). Some political representants are visible, and Roma students are more frequently attending high schools and universities compared to the previous decades. The political representation seems better at local and regional level, but weaker on the state level. Even a person at the position of the head of plenipotentiary office for Roma communities may sometimes feel powerless, (for example in case when the office does not have a political party backup, they are left with the role of an analytic, consulting body without real power or mandate to influence policy). Participants also drew attention to the fact that not enough Roma representatives are present in the NGOs as employees, or as members of the advisory/management boards, or even in the governmental institutions dedicated to Roma communities. Here, the participant explains her experience with a local council where passive Roma people would be acceptable but not those willing to actively participate:

" *City councils would love to have Roma representatives who only nod their heads. Once they realize you actually understand things you are persona non grata for them and they try to avoid you. But I am well trained, they throw me out the door and I come back through the window.* (Participant 12, Slovakia)

In Spain, Roma activism does not possess the strength that other minority movements do. Participants agreed they have Roma empowerment, however, they are denied opportunities to access positions of power. Participants report Roma to have a presence, however they do not have a voice in institutional spaces and therefore lack influence in Spanish society:

" *In Spain you cannot be a politician who represents the Roma, that possibility doesn't exist. The Roma don't have that political recognition in this country.* (Participant 2, Spain)

In Hungary, they discussed that the representation of Roma students in education, although rising, is still not satisfactory:

" *I do not think that it is natural to have Roma experts as professors … but there are more and more Roma people who finish their PhD … very few though. … I think that it is visible that our generation is present in these processes.* (Participant 1, Hungary)

Especially, girls and women experience an effect of the "glass ceiling" – there are fewer girls in higher levels of education which subsequently affects their lower academic representation or even presence in other positions.

The **role of women in activism** and representation was also discussed. Overall, participants were convinced it is extremely important to have more Roma women as activists. Women were described as the key aspect to activism, their role as essential. Roma women´s asset in activism lies in their potential for being role models, for their determination and networking. Also they were perceived as ideal carriers of change in Roma communities as they are present in the families. Both among the majority as well as in Roma communities, the persisting gender stereotype ties Roma women to the household and childcare and presents negative consequences by preventing women from entering other positions in society. Here, a participant describes how sexism prevents Roma women from public representation:

" *Their [Roma women] situation is bad. They should be more present in the public sphere, in both the representation and in education. Their gender is a disadvantage for at least two reasons. First, their full-time job is motherhood, and unfortunately, it is embedded in the culture. And it is not only about the Roma culture or family model, but also about the Hungarian culture and family model. Second, and partly because of this family model – and this causes me my biggest heartache – there are no Roma girls in schools after some point, and consequently they are not present in the representation.* (Participant 7, Hungary)

However, the fact that the highest positions in society are mostly occupied by men complicates certain issues. It is also a reason for channelling more support and targeting interventions to address the unequal position of Roma girls and women. Participants emphasized that it is women who suffer double discrimination: for being women and for being Roma.

### Best practice and it barriers

In this part, we explore the participants' perspectives on what they consider best practice, what barriers they face, and their opinions on questions of contact and other practices.

The interviewed Roma activists have been engaged in a wide variety of activities from education and training activities, increasing Roma rights awareness, creating online content about Roma issues, social work, political representation or Roma culture support and art performance. The activists highlighted that one aim of their activities and practices (programs and interventions) is to change the attitudes and narratives of the majority with the aim to reach integration. Participants generally agreed on the need to reduce stereotypes and prejudice and they found the search for the best practice examples valuable. They considered **contact as a potential tool for social change**, but also emphasized that contact must be achieved under specific conditions. In their views, good practices have occurred in interventions or actions where both Roma and non-Roma were present and during activities where equal status of all persons present was promoted.

*" ... a horizontal space, a space of equals, a space where people are more or less the same age, where you also create a bit of informal education dynamics.* (Participant 3, Spain)

They also felt that interventions that create informal settings, or use informal activities can gain more success. Authenticity and honest presence of Roma perspective, story and identity was also an element positively recognised by our participants.

*" I go there and talk about my Roma identity in front of 30 strangers, about how I experienced discrimination, about my negative experiences, and they do the same, I listen to them, it will lead to something wonderful, because we get to know each other's thoughts.* (Participant 3, Hungary)

More importantly, a good/successful program does not tell the story of others instead of those who experienced the story:

*" For instance, by using the means of art, by paying attention to not letting the majority define the narratives and letting the members of the marginalized groups speak about their own world. (Participant 5, Hungary)*

The representation of the Roma voice and presence was important. **Giving voice to Roma and ensuring Roma participation** in the process of designing and implementing the interventions proved crucial for the success. In contrast, participants mentioned problematic experiences with attempts of professionals who made interventions without first asking what Roma people need. From their experience, interventions carried out without considering the real problems of people did not bring the expected results. In these cases, authors generalized in an attempt to implement a plan that worked in another place but in fact had little in common with the situation of the community where they were trying to replicate it. Perceiving Roma minority as a homogenous group was a related problem our participants observed: "*if you start from the basis that being Roma is a social problem, you are assuming that it is an unstructured mass*" (participant, Spain). This sometimes led to carrying out activities in communities solely because they were inhabited by a higher percentage of Roma people, assuming that the mere fact of Roma presence is a problem.

All the participants agreed on the need for more Roma people engaged in the different roles and involved in the processes of social intervention. They believe that young people need to have contact with positive role models, positive references from their own community – e. g. Roma teachers in the educational sector. And most importantly, the interventions that empower Roma were considered as positively contributing to social change – those that create situations, implement interventions and support programs where Roma people are empowered:

*" It was a two-year program, we devoted two years to a selected group of people, including foreign trips, all these coaches in English and it was really great. Yes, [we need to] empower.* (Participant 3, Slovakia)

There was an agreement on the need for Roma role models and **higher visibility of (successful) Roma figures**. But again, recommendations call for more cautiousness and avoid focusing only on presenting a sole Roma person and their success (especially in the media), because neglecting to inform about systematic structural oppression of Roma means conducting a deceiving image:

" *...it [success] is presented always as a success in which the individual is key. (...) Anyone can achieve this, it is just a question of willpower. And strength, and motivation (...) other Roma people are portrayed in a negative light, because highlighting the significance of the individual needs a statement about the lack of others' persistence and willpower. The whole conversation is not at all revolving around systematic oppression.* (Participant 3, Hungary)

One of the ways indicated to reduce indifference and anti-Gypsyism among the majority population towards Roma is to stop minimizing the problems faced by the Roma people. On many occasions, non-Roma people try to make the complaints of discrimination against Roma invisible or reduce the severity. The educational system is once again mentioned, where the history of the Roma in the countries is not made visible enough.

The participants recognised the current **scarcity of awareness of Roma people, their identity, history and culture** and that it needs to be raised from the early age. Especially when participants took into consideration the negative and hostile context in which Roma people are portrayed in their respective countries. One of the most important points that resonated almost in each country was the need for repeated, long-term and systematic work.

" *First of all, I'd say it would take time, because it's not- it's definitely not a matter of one event, right? It's a pure utopia [to expect change] from an event where we meet once.* (Participant 11, Slovakia)

In order to change indifference among the majority showing real data in discussions can deconstruct myths about Roma, also educational trainings and having authority figures as allies can be helpful. Based on participants´ experiences, successful activities have set realistic goals and created as many meaningful collaborations as possible (more about allyship in the next part). Examples of best practice that were not directly connected to contact interventions included building networks across (not only) Roma NGOs and strengthening relationships within the community. The support of networking across Roma people and pro-Roma organizations which is also a way of empowering the minority.

Roma activists were cautious in terms of describing successes and pointed out several **barriers to goals of Roma activism**. They experienced a difficulty of achieving sustainable change, especially by small scale interventions within the broader hostile context, and without the support of authorities. On many occasions, the interventions tend to "disappear" even in cases where the effect was positive. For activists and organizations financial and staff stability would be beneficial, but they experience a lack of steady supply of money which affects their possibilities of hiring quality employees. When it comes to project funding, the complexity of

the application process often causes that the funds are unattainable for smaller or less experienced applicants. The organizations compete for the same pool of funds, and communication with the decision makers can be difficult. Activists and organizations, despite having success at changing the lives of people in their communities, often feel powerless in terms of changing the legislation. When working with people from poor communities, poverty also presents a strong barrier to any activism.

*" ... those people, even if they don't have any jobs, they spend an awful lot of time trying to make at least some basic living (...) these people are exhausted, stressed, it's hard to expect any activism from them.* (Participant 4, Slovakia)

Although the Roma minority is notably invisible and unrecognized, their portrayal (e.g. in media) often increases rather than eliminates a biased perception. It is therefore important to review the content and context in which Roma appear. Also, paternalistic attitudes towards Roma and perception of Roma merely as clients (of social work or help in general) in need of help and protection prevent them to apply their agency and contribute to low representation of Roma in organizations, boards and decision making processes where their lives and issues are considered.

Recommendations based on participants´ opinion on best practice examples:

- Although there was an agreement on the contacts interventions to have potential to change intergroup relations and mobilise both Roma and non-Roma, the contact itself needs to happen under certain circumstances:
  - members of both groups need to be present ensuring they are in a situation of equal status;
  - ensure authenticity within contact interventions – stories should be shared and told by people who actually experienced them, educators/trainees need to be identified with the cause and understand the social situation;
  - give voice to Roma – whenever it concerns them;
  - choose informal settings or include informal elements into activities when possible.
- Mapping the situation first before designing an activity/intervention, respect the needs of the Roma and community you are going to work with and create targeted implementation.
- Giving voice to Roma is important at every stage of an activity, whether contact based or not. Include Roma in the decision making process, in mapping the needs of the community, and in designing the activities/interventions and their implementation.
- Raising awareness (about Roma, their history, culture and identity) is crucial from the very early age.

- Repeated, long-term and systematic work brings better outcomes compared to one time or short-lived activities.

- Empowering Roma - create situations, implement interventions and support programs where Roma people are empowered and can apply their agency.

## Allyship

Most of the interviewees expressed that allies are necessary to achieve social change, no matter whether they were **Roma, non-Roma or other minority members**.

*" Anybody could be a good ally. I do not think that an ally must have a minority identity… To be a good supporter, you need to really understand your own position and privileges.* (Participant 3, Hungary)

Allyship with the majority was frequently mentioned as crucial, because there would not be any social change without cooperating together on the common cause. Here, the participant describes that thanks to cooperation with others she received support in starting an NGO:

*" I was getting more and more information and I had such nice people around me who told me that in order to do even more and better [activism], we should set up an association.* (Participant 12, Slovakia)

Regarding allyship with other minorities, most of the interviewees expressed their openness and saw an advantage in working together with other minorities. For example the issue of school inclusion affects different groups that can ally together and create effective pressure on institutions.

*" So I think that seeking alliances with other disadvantaged groups is what we should be doing in all areas.* (Participant 3, Spain)

The cooperation can be fruitful due to joint forces. On the other hand, there were also concerns that allying with other disadvantaged groups can cause the Roma struggle to appear less attractive, or that other agendas may overshadow the Roma minority.

When asked about **what makes a good ally,** participants described various aspects.

Good allies:

- are present and engaged from the very first steps;
- give space to Roma people, meaning letting Roma people to express themselves;
- participate;
- are ready to listen without judgements;
- identify themselves with and support the issue (and not the organization);
- are ready to gather direct experience from what they are about to support;
- are willing to learn and to take on the viewpoints of the Roma;
- are ready for the cultural conversation;
- do more than simply giving or getting donations and financial support (e.g., by constantly sustaining interest and connections);
- do not make decisions without the community they want to represent;
- are able to face their blind spots;
- are capable of admitting and correcting their mistakes (if there are any).

*"[a good non-Roma ally] allows [Roma people] to speak and express themselves, he/she doesn't speak through their mouth. If he/she approaches, listens, and participates in what they have proposed, he/she doesn't try to impose his/her criteria or activities.* (Participant 5, Spain)

There are many ways and forms in which one can be a good ally. From signing a petition, donating money, listening to and standing up for your Roma friends to professional cooperation, or work with communities. But the participants reflected it is not always an easy task:

*"And if we are talking about social responsibility in its active form, then I don't think that we have such an agenda here towards the Roma. [I mean] that people are able, willing, ready to give money, but very few are ready to give themselves.* (Participant 9, Slovakia)

Several interviewees mentioned that a good non-Roma ally is not acting as a "big white saviour" keeping Roma in the position of aid-recipients.

*"For example, sort of keeping people in some sort of passive role as recipients of aid. (...) that's like we good white "Gadjo" [non-Roma] have come to save you and they feel like they're doing a terribly good job.* (Participant 1, Slovakia)

To make their point more precise, participants also described that **bad allies** feel offended by the NGOs, they are afraid of losing their territory, and place their own interests ahead of the Roma cause. An example of a bad ally is a politician with ulterior motives, trying only to get votes for themselves.

The participants felt that willingness to participate in social change and learn from one's mistakes in order to become a better ally is more important than being the perfect ally. Finally, the position of two equal partners (although different in some respect) is essential for good allyship:

*"We do not want you - I don't know - that you should always be smaller, because what we are asking you is to be equal, so that we can connect as equals. This attitude makes it really hard because I am not asking you to agree with me on everything, but to try to understand the experiences or my viewpoints that I have in my position. And then add your own, what you experience is in your position.* (Participant 3, Hungary)

# Summary and Recommendations

The report summarizes the main findings from 32 interviews with Roma activists in Hungary, Slovakia, and Spain covering the topics of their journey to activism, their identification with and perception of activism, the broader context of activism, best practices, and allyship.

Roma minority in all three countries, Hungary, Slovakia and Spain, experience negative attitudes from the part of majority, therefore most of Roma women and men face discrimination. The participants´ primary **motivation to become an activist** drew from their perception of social injustice and the need to improve the situation of Roma people. The role models such as educators, members of NGOs, parents, or close relatives being activists as well as the work of NGOs inspired them to engage in work for the Roma community. Unfortunately, the main cause of their activism also creates the strongest **barrier** to their endeavours - expressions of anti-Gypsyism, and the ongoing stereotypical and negative image of Roma. During their work, they have faced challenges related to low awareness of Roma history and culture in society, minor space given to Roma voices, and Roma perceived as unequal partners in the implementation of policies. Roma activism was therefore deemed necessary. For the participants, activism and the activist role were associated with the **persistent and committed fight against injustice and for equality**; advocating for Roma and human rights and empowering Roma people; and inspiring both majority and majority to engage in social change. Participants appreciated the diversity in activism – they mentioned different forms and levels, and pointed out a generational shift as well. Some participants expressed hesitance with accepting the label of the activist which in some instances was related to a radical or derogatory perception of activism. For some participants, the distinction between a paid job and activism as a mission was considered important.

The activists highlighted that one aim of their work is to change the attitudes and narratives of the majority to reach integration and the need to reduce stereotypes and prejudice. They considered **contact as a potential tool for social change**, but recommended specific conditions of the contact need to be met – they emphasized the equal status of all engaged in the activity, recommended informal settings, and stressed that stories of Roma people should be told by the protagonists themselves. Giving voice to Roma and ensuring Roma participation in the process of designing and implementing the interventions proved crucial for the success. They also advocated for **increased visibility of Roma** role models in contact with youth. Generally, the need for more systematic, repeated, and long-term work was expressed. In order to reduce indifference towards Roma among the majority population, participants highlighted the importance to stop minimizing the problems faced by the Roma community and focus on deconstructing myths about Roma.

Participants generally received **positive reactions** to their work and expressions of gratitude both from the Roma community as well as from non-Roma people. They also described difficulties in representing all Roma due to diversity in the communities and mentioned

instances of "double jeopardy" when Roma people did not feel well represented by public activists due to the perceived gap between them. **Non-governmental organizations** were described as important carriers of the change, despite the fact they often face challenges of under-financing, financial and personal instability, or simply being under-sized. Participants criticized those organizations and individuals that only focus on raising financial resources without proper ethics or practice, declaring "the Roma cause". We also registered criticism towards so-called "white NGOs" - with the majority of employees of non-Roma origin. The issue of Roma representation was crucial to our participants, they agreed that both the academic and the political **representation of the Roma community is very low and the participation of Roma is still problematic**. Paternalistic attitudes towards Roma and perception of Roma merely as clients (of social work or help in general) in need of help and protection prevent them to apply their agency and contribute to low representation of Roma. Not enough Roma representatives are present in the governmental and non-governmental organizations dedicated to Roma communities (employees, members of boards), and they are denied opportunities to access positions of power. In their opinion, the representation of Roma women is still low and unfortunately, they face double discrimination: for being women and for being Roma. **Women** were described as the key aspect and essential to activism thanks to being present in the families; their potential as carriers of change in Roma communities was recognized. On the other hand, the persisting gender stereotype that ties Roma women to households prevents them from entering other positions in society.

Finally, participants considered **allyship** as an indispensable part of any social change – cooperation with different groups is crucial, either with Roma, non-Roma people, or other disadvantaged groups. Characteristics of "good" allies such as willingness to listen, participate and learn; stand up for the cause, and give space to Roma were mentioned. The participants felt that willingness to engage in social change and learn from one's mistakes in order to become a better ally is more important than being perfect.

Based on the interviews with participants, we state **selected recommendations** on how to overcome indifference and increase mobilisation for social change:

- **Inclusion and Voice of Roma**: include Roma in the topics that concern them - provide Roma participation in every step of the designing and implementation of activities, ensure adequate Roma representation in the board members and among employees of organizations working in the area of social change in favour of the Roma communities, invite Roma representants as speakers to panels where the issues concern them, make effort to increase Roma representation at all levels of governing (from the local councils to ministries).
- **Empowerment**: find ways to empower Roma people (leaders, colleagues, students, community members, etc.) and support them in their actions on behalf of the Roma community, not only allowing them to be present, but also a speaker of their needs and to actively shape Roma policies and their implementation.

- **Potential**: identify and develop those with the potential to contribute to social change - people from all socio-economic backgrounds, make sure not to exclude women as they can be important carriers of change. Target activities and more support to address the unequal position of Roma girls and women.
- **Visibility**: create opportunities to make Roma role models visible to your audience (whether Roma, non-Roma, youth, or adults) but avoid highlighting only the sole success of an individual, instead remember to inform about the broader context of systematic and structural oppression of Roma. (Although the Roma minority is notably invisible and unrecognized, their portrayal (e.g. in media) often increases rather than eliminates a biased perception.)
- **Awareness**: improve awareness about Roma culture, history, and diversity of Roma communities; focus on debunking myths about Roma communities.
- **Allyship**: build alliances and collaborations, seize opportunities to broaden the networks. Invite people to engage, because social change is achievable only when representatives from all parties concerned join and cooperate for the cause.

List of collaborators

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For more information about the project visit https://polrom.eu/engage/ or contact Lucia Hargašová corresponding author at lucia.hargasova@savba.sk (optional).

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