

## Key Facts

Reproductive justice is a key issue in empowering young Roma women to make informed decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health.

Mentoring from significant adults, educators and diverse stakeholders, supported by national policies, is essential.

Roma girls need the support of ongoing, participatory action research-based initiatives, not short-term projects.

## Participatory Action Research With Roma Girls: Lessons and Recommendations From RoMoMatteR

By University of Alicante researchers and the RoMoMatteR Project team\*

Historically, Europe's Roma population has faced poverty, marginalization and social exclusion, aspects that impact Roma people beginning in infancy and deny children their right to a safe and educated childhood [1]. Reproductive justice is a key issue in empowering young Roma women to make informed decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health, by means of community interventions based on improving sex education. Though women taking up education and labor market opportunities could support a path out of poverty and marginalization for Roma communities, the life opportunities of Roma girls are threatened by social structural determinants that affect their rates of school success and reproductive and life decisions.

### About the RoMoMatteR Project

The European RoMoMatteR project "Empowering at-Risk Roma Girls' Mattering Through Reproductive Justice" is focused on improving the reproductive rights and health of Roma girls in Spain, Romania and Bulgaria. Funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Program of the European Union from 2019-2021, we used a participatory empowerment approach to reproductive justice research to address gender and racial discrimination patterns that are strongly associated with early motherhood and poor reproductive health outcomes among Roma women. Since 2019 project actions have focused on empowering teenagers to decide their life goals freely, to be recognized and valued regardless of their decisions about motherhood, and to influence the decision-making processes in their communities.

Results from the project suggest that Roma girls have engaged in an experience of empowerment, with integral inclusion in the research design, implementation and adaptation processes. A wide range of involved stakeholders considers there to be a strong need for ongoing empowerment activities with a participatory focus, such as RoMoMatteR, integrated and supported across sectors. This brief discusses some of the lessons and recommendations from the experience of the RoMoMatteR Project in conducting participatory research with Roma girls.

### Reproductive Rights and Health via the Lens of Participatory Action Research and Empowerment Methodologies

RoMoMatteR was carried out by fieldwork teams in four different geographical contexts: Spain (Alicante, Cordoba), Romania (Bucharest) and Bulgaria (Straldzha), all of which are characterized by situations of poverty and discrimination. Project partners included seven university research institutions with the collaboration of Roma community/civic organizations, advocacy groups, on the ground facilitators, Roma families and Roma girls, engaging in participatory action research processes (PAR). In the RoMoMatteR Project, we aimed to engage in transforming social and cultural resources to support creating life and reproductive justice projects among Roma girls. Using empowerment methodologies and PAR methods, we hoped to gain a greater understanding of the challenges Roma girls face and the mechanisms that influence their sexual and reproductive health rights.

We also aimed to support transformative action to promote social justice for and by youth, through

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# PAR and Empowerment Methodologies

granting them the power to implement actions and capacity building to support adjustment to their needs. These methods included Participatory Action Research [2] and Empowerment Evaluation [3], which have been used successfully in work with minorities, including in the evaluation of the National Roma Integration Strategy's health component in Spain and in its adaptation at the local level in Seville (Spain) [4].

## Impact and Adaptation Due to COVID-19 Measures

One of the benefits of these methods is that they give real power to research participants, in this case Roma girls themselves, to influence decisions that affect them while incorporating the best available evidence [5]. They also provide the ability to gradually adapt to the empowerment of the participants in the process, providing greater experiential value than traditional community programs that often tend to serve the research itself more than the population.

A significant part of the work of the project took place during the COVID/19 pandemic. This greatly impacted the work, but paradoxically provided changes in project structure and opportunities for exercising empowerment among different involved parties. The RoMoMatteR methodology involved a number of workshops that were arranged from March to June 2020, yet the confinement measures to address COVID/19 prevented these events taking place as originally planned.

Fieldwork was postponed at all of the sites, though all teams remained in contact with participating communities and families. In Alicante in the summer of 2020, between the two waves of the pandemic, RoMoMatteR sessions were organized, and adapted workshops were designed. Other sites also made adaptations so as to be able to work in ways that served the girls as best as possible.

The period of COVID-19 confinement involved new social norms and a fear of be-

RoMoMatteR Project PAR
<b>Beneficiary Groups</b>
<i>Roma girls ages 10-14</i>
<b>Research Setting</b>
<i>Cities of Alicante and Cordoba (Spain), Bucharest (Romania) and Stralzdha (Bulgaria)</i>
<b>Study Period</b>
<i>January, 2019 - June, 2021</i>

coming infected with the virus. Handling these conditions involved self-management, consensus and commitments between the girls, their families, the facilitators and the community partners and researchers. This shifted the role of the project researchers, which went from controlling the application of the methodology to designing adaptations and a new structure, which placed girls and involved communities at the forefront of the design and implementation of activities. Thus, the learnings and recommendations included in this brief come from a context of exceptional, continual change, and much of the empowerment experienced among the involved girls and stakeholders emerged in part due to this exceptional situation.

## Project Results: PAR Fostered Empowerment Experiences Among Roma Girls and Communities

The results of RoMoMatteR fieldwork suggest that the project was successful in demonstrating and integrating many of the principles of the empowerment framework, though it should be noted that there was a perception of administrative overload related to the evaluation documentation.

Roma girls demonstrated community ownership, and effectively exercised their right to make decisions related to the direction of the program and the evaluation process. A process of inclusion and an increase in community knowledge was documented.

<sup>2</sup>Participatory Action Research with Roma Girls (RGPARG) methodology is detailed on the Romomatter website: <https://romomatter.org>.

<sup>3</sup>Fetterman, D. (1996). Empowerment evaluation. an introduction to theory and practice. En D. Fetterman, F. Kaftarian, & A. Wandersman, Empowerment evaluation. Knowledge and tools for self-assessment and accountability (págs. 3-46). Thousand Oaks

(Ca): SAGE Publications.

<sup>4</sup>Empowerment Evaluation: Key methodology aspects from participatory research and intervention with Roma girls, paper forthcoming.

## About RoMoMatteR

Overarching project objective: To address gender discrimination by empowering Roma girls to envision their own futures and choose motherhood only if and when they are ready.

## RoMoMatter Tesimonials

"Girls need to see Roma women in their communities who have met their goals and not stopped being Roma."

"We need to highlight examples to help girls see that they can preserve who they are, their customs and traditions, even while following a different path"  
-Community participant

## RoMoMatter Project Results

Thus, the project represents the shared experience of a wide local alliance involving many stakeholders, including families, Roma associations, local institutions and others, though, due to COVID-19, there was a substantially reduced social network. Despite these limitations, Roma girls were recognized as experiential experts, capable of analyzing their own problems with the help of facilitators and also capable of imagining possible actions to navigate problems.

Another focus of the project that was central to the empowerment approach was capacity building. At the end of the intervention process, Roma girls indicated perceiving greater control over decisions related to their own lives and life projects. The PAR methodology challenged the implicit hierarchy between research partners, community organizations and the community, promoting negotiation and adaptation of roles and procedures.

The process also fostered a sense of mutual and interactive responsibility among those responsible for the project, the research team, the civic organizations involved, the facilitators and the girls themselves. Finally, the results of the project were coordinated horizontally with girls' participation in developing critical discourses in contexts of collective deliberation [5].

These positive project results are also due to the perseverance of the women and girls and their determination to adapt to the social and health circumstances, always aiming for the best possible implementation of activities, despite the challenges.

### Key Learning on Participatory Research with Roma Girls

Roma girls who participated in RoMoMatter demonstrated empowerment, in terms of topics like community knowledge, ownership, capacity building and accountability, in navigating relationships with the diverse project stakeholder groups,

and in terms of exercising intention in methodologies and scope of the project itself. This is especially relevant given that most of the PAR activities were carried out in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Roma girls need the support of ongoing, long-term participatory-based initiatives, not short-term projects

Experiences in RoMoMatter suggest that a long-term perspective should be employed in efforts to empower Roma girls' mattering linked to reproductive justice; short-term projects are not recommended.

Project community participants expressed on numerous occasions that the girl-centric, empowerment-focused activities of the project should be included in school curriculums or other environments where girls would have a more continuous experience of them, rather than a limited, short-term support that ends after a few short months. The PAR research framework was a crucial element in the relevance and effectiveness of the project activities.

In addition, Roma girls should be considered central agents in all phases of development and implementation (including the way the problem is defined, how the project is designed, implemented, monitored, evaluated, adapted and knowledge transferred). Roma girls can play a central role in helping us understand the wider social context as one that is characterized by oppression related to age, gender, ethnicity, place, migration, and other sociodemographic characteristics that can both determine and jeopardize empowerment strategies.

### Mentoring, implemented by educators and by diverse stakeholders and supported by national policies, is essential

Reproductive justice can only be obtained with the

<sup>5</sup>Empowerment Evaluation: Key methodology aspects from participatory research and intervention with Roma girls, paper forthcoming.



## RoMoMatteR Testimonials

Family support and trust and recognition of girls' hopes and dreams is the key piece in Roma girls' motivation to continue their studies. "I want them to understand what I want to achieve" "That they support my dreams and wish to travel" make decisions." - Roma girl participants

## Key Learning: PAR with Roma Girls

support of long-term policies set by national authorities, though projects can play a role. This is because Roma girls need significant support, both in the form of services and financial support from private and public sources, and also in terms of recognition and emotional support from their families and communities.

Teachers and educators particularly, as well as academics and private sector representatives, can form key supports in mentoring programs designed to help children and their parents pursue education and fulfill their potential. Opportunities to get to know key role models, which can be provided in the context of community work, are also important in giving girls exposure to examples of Roma women who have had self-determination in their lives and lived some of their goals and dreams.

One of the achievements of the RoMoMatteR project was that it helped to bring awareness of these issues to the project's direct beneficiaries. Roma girls in the project reported that they were supported in identifying their dreams and in being motivated to pursue them. The continuity of these motivations remains to be seen, but it is likely that more projects of this type will be needed in the future.

### Roma communities must provide Roma-girl-centered safe spaces, and other trustworthy supports

Throughout the project, it was clear that Roma parents and communities, including schools, are a key node of support for Roma girls' empowerment that needs to be structured and cultivated. Roma girls want to feel trusted and championed by their communities, by organizations that work within the community and by their parents. Thus, community coordination is a key to making sure that high quality professionals are involved in neighborhood associations that can support girls.

It is also important that community, parents

and educators work together to ensure that school is seen as a resource and not as a threat or as a source of judgement.

The Roma young women participants also expressed their desire for the trust of their parents; it was highlighted as a crucial element for them. The fear of family members that their adolescent daughters would marry or meet someone early, drives them to limit their activities and freedom. Often, these restrictions result in girls abandoning their studies.

Girls also need ongoing, long-term access to safe spaces (both inside and outside of schools) where they can communicate, socialize and share ideas. It is essential that such spaces and the topics they encompass are chosen by girls themselves and not dictated by adults. One of the benefits of the RoMoMatteR Project was that it provided these activities, with a positive, empowerment-oriented focus. Their rights to education need to be supported and guaranteed as a precursor.

### PAR research processes, in and of themselves, are an opportunity to promote empowerment of Roma girls

In the RoMoMatteR Project, a participatory empowerment framework ensured that the project was guided by the needs of local communities and able to build on their resources, giving a voice to the community in identifying needs and advocating for rights, within the context of the community's own strengths and culture.

Empowerment methodologies were instrumental in helping Roma girls develop a critical perspective regarding decisions involved in their own lives and in promoting a higher level of ownership. These included, among other things, ownership of decisions about goals and processes during project implementation.



## RoMoMatteR Testimonials

“Having this knowledge [of girls participating], is useful in designing PAR activities. Because of the objectives of community development and empowerment of girls, we avoid the risk that they don't participate and abandon the project due to it not being sensitive to their needs.” -Roma community organization participant

# Conclusions and Recommendations

## For Communities (Families, Local Coalitions, Significant Adults)

- It is recommended that long-term strategies be adopted, and to avoid short-term initiatives. There is a real need and desire from diverse participants for the activities and initiatives that began under the RoMoMatteR Project to continue.
- The point of departure for every action should be to listen to Roma girls, and to promote spaces for communication during the whole process, including diagnosis, design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, re-design and knowledge transfer.
- Actions to empower Roma girls should be embedded in a broad-based societal framework to empower girls and to recognize children's rights; this includes an equitable curriculum, co-education, and to promote an active role in the learning process (projects, sports, initiatives, and others), understanding education as a driver for social change.
- There is a need for support of parents and promotion of the social interaction between schools, families, members of the community and professionals who develop mentoring programs for girls through significant adults, and better knowledge of the community resources (health and educational services, sport facilities, transport system, and others).

- Roma girls need greater access to safe spaces, socialization opportunities and extra-curricular activities.

- The transition to high school is a key time for Roma girls, in which they have a greater need for support and adapted curriculum. School expulsions should be avoided, since they reduce girls' time connecting with educational supports.

- Activities (such as those of the RoMoMatteR Project) that include an empowerment focus and a way for Roma girls to build self-knowledge and self-reflection, should be included in school or community-based activities.

## For Community Partners

- The social spaces created by the community associations are an opportunity to promote an active role for Roma girls in their own communities and also to work at the wider social context (municipality, mass media, educational and health system, and so on). They can be promoted as agents of social change, acting as community representatives, and supported to produce communicative action.

- Community partners should approach Roma girls without preconceptions about Roma girls' needs and what empowerment means for them. These cannot be assumed based on gender, age, ethnicity, place of residence or other characteristics, as they can differ between individuals and communities.

- The more structured and independent the community entity is, the more it has an opportunity to combat unjust power relations and social norms. This also implies working in alliance with other social groups. The social structures that produce racism and sexism should be analyzed in terms of how they respond to wider social processes: public policies, political parties, cultural norms, regulations, labor markets, institutions, knowledge production systems, and others.

## For Researchers and the Scientific Community

- PAR projects are an opportunity to involve Roma girls in scientific work as agents



# Conclusions and Recommendations, cont.

(not subjects), to stimulate scientific careers, and to recognize lay knowledge as a legitimate source of information. Projects can benefit from Roma girls having a key role in how the research topic is defined and problematized.

- The scientific method (and producing data) should be respectful, empathetic and guided by the living conditions and needs of Roma girls, both as individuals and as members of a social group. Demanding and bureaucratic strategies do not serve the girls and should be avoided as much as possible.
- Participatory research projects are needed that aim to produce social transformation and involve community-based participation throughout the process.
- The research approach should depart from and be able to identify oppression mechanisms, including forms of reproductive oppression as a result of systems based on race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age and immigrant status.
- Leadership and empowerment of Roma people/communities in research processes should be prioritized, while recognizing the need for logistical support for organizational partners in helping to administer and facilitate said research processes.
- In all research with adolescents, it is important to consider the needs, motivations and timing of the participants, and to maintain balance. Time is especially needed for girls to begin to feel like they belong to a group. Research intervention and an overall commitment to multi-sector and multi-level collaboration supported by long-term funding that provides for continuity.

## For Policy Makers

- Policies in support of Roma women and girls should be formulated based on their input, as they can provide much needed insight on their needs and priorities, both at the individual and

group level. The policy making process should prioritize their input, and decision makers should listen without judgement.

- A reproductive justice approach– which includes that women should make their own decisions about their own lives– and reliance on scientific evidence using PAR or other participatory approaches should be used to inform policy.
- Policy initiatives to support Roma girls should address discrimination, institutional racism and sexism in their program theory.
- Creating policies that address reproductive health of Roma girls is deeply intertwined with responding to the needs of Roma communities in which girls live and grow. Thus, investment in the physical, social, educational, technological (including internet) and recreational infrastructure of communities and neighborhoods can also have a significant supportive impact on girls.

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