



# IZABELLA'S STORY

LESBIAN ROMA



# AT THE INTERSECTION OF MULTIPLE WORLDS

## Life stories of Roma and Roma LGBTQ people

In a society that sanctions individual differences and attaches harmful labels too easily to those who do not conform to the majority, Roma and LGBTQ people often navigate with difficulty various areas of life. More often than not, they are harshly judged or marginalized, and in the public space, they are rather invisible, many of them choosing not to reveal their identities in an attempt to protect themselves.

We believe in the power of personal stories to overcome prejudice, simplistic labelling and even discrimination. That is why we are sharing the life stories of five Roma people, including four LGBTQ people from all over the country, with very different life experiences, different levels of education and professions, and different personalities. These are stories about personal quests and self-discovery, happiness and personal victories, about trauma and healing, difficulties and love stories. Their protagonists are **Adina**, a Roma woman; **Dora**, a non-binary Hungarian Roma person; **George**, a gay Roma man; **Izabella**, a lesbian Roma woman and **Daniel**, a gay Roma man. To stay true to their authentic voices, their stories are presented in the form of interviews with small changes in order: their names were changed to protect the identity of the interviewees, the details that could lead to the identification of the interviewees were removed, and some of the answers were edited for brevity and clarity.

The answers in these interviews reflect exclusively the opinions of the interviewees, and are not the official point of view of the Centre for Legal Resources (CLR), nor of the partners involved in this project.

This material is part of the "[INTERSECT - Changing the narrative of discrimination](#)" project, coordinated by the Centre for Legal Resources (CLR), in partnership with the Equality and Human Rights Action Centre (ACTEDO), MozaiQ LGBT Association and the Civic Union of Roma Youth in Romania (UCTRR).

## WHO IS IZABELLA?

Tell us a little bit about yourself.

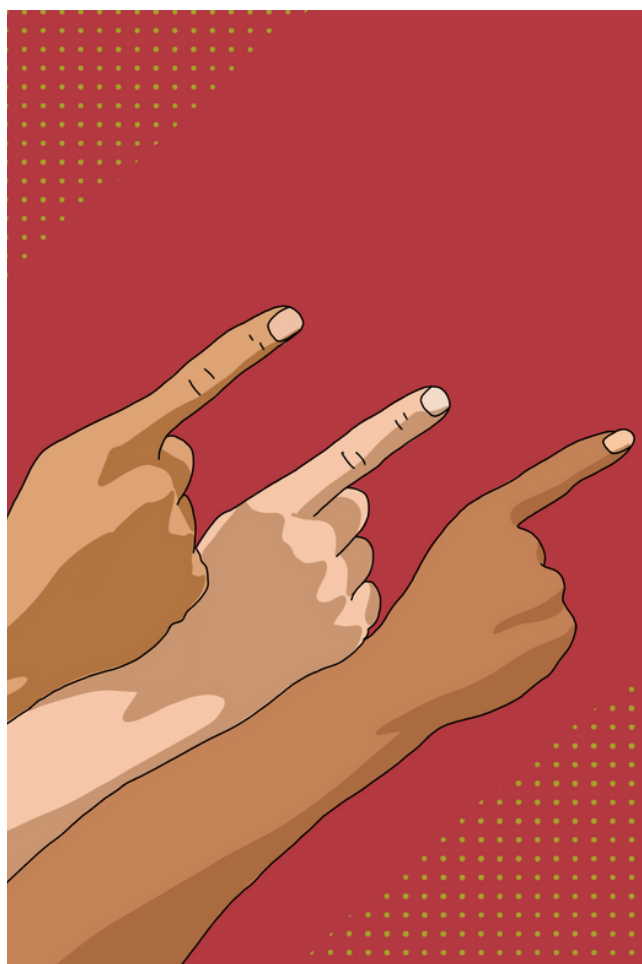
I am a lesbian Roma woman, I'm from Bucharest and I also grew up here, normally I work in sales and management, but now I'm looking for work in any field, since I lost my job. Right now, I live in a rented place, not with my parents.

## HAVE YOU EVER FACED SITUATIONS WHERE YOU HAVE BEEN MISTREATED, DISCRIMINATED AGAINST BASED ON YOUR ETHNICITY OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

Can you describe one of these incidents?

My first experience with racism happened while I was in first grade, pretty much when I started school. I had a conflict with one of my classmates and one day her mother showed up at school, and, during a break, in the front of the classroom and in front of everyone she called me a 'dirty g\*\*\*\*'. As a 7 year old child, [imagine having] another child's mother come and bully you in front of everyone...

Regarding my sexual orientation, I consider myself lucky. This is where the double standard comes into play: it was easier for me to navigate society as a woman, even though I have same-sex relationships.



In my experience, the relationships between two women are more easily accepted by society than the ones between two men or transgender people. Besides, I hear from my trans friends that it is very difficult for them to enter the workforce because of their gender identity.

I can't necessarily say that I have been personally targeted by homophobes, but I've been around homophobes that made jokes, not necessarily addressed to me, but they didn't sit well. At work, mostly. At a certain point the workplace can become a hostile environment when others make jokes at gay people's expense... Like, 'f\*\*\*\*\*', 'Dude, you a h\*\*o?' To which I usually respond with 'And what if he's a h\*\*o?'. I'm pretty open about my sexuality, I've been out to my friends since I was like 14 and since I was 17 to my family, and I'm trying to educate the community around me, whatever that may be.



## **HOW WAS YOUR COMING OUT EXPERIENCE?**

I've had friends that didn't understand and chose to distance themselves from me, but they didn't say it to my face, they just sort of disappeared. And my mom told me that she knew. She told me that society is judgemental, and this would make it hard for me. Then, she went through the 'God created man and woman' phase... At one point my stepfather reacted like 'I don't want to drink from the same cup you did'. But, right now, all my family knows, including my grandparents, but I'm not entirely sure if it's acceptance or more like they got used to me.

## **HOW WERE THE INTERACTIONS WITH YOUR CLASSMATES AND TEACHERS?**

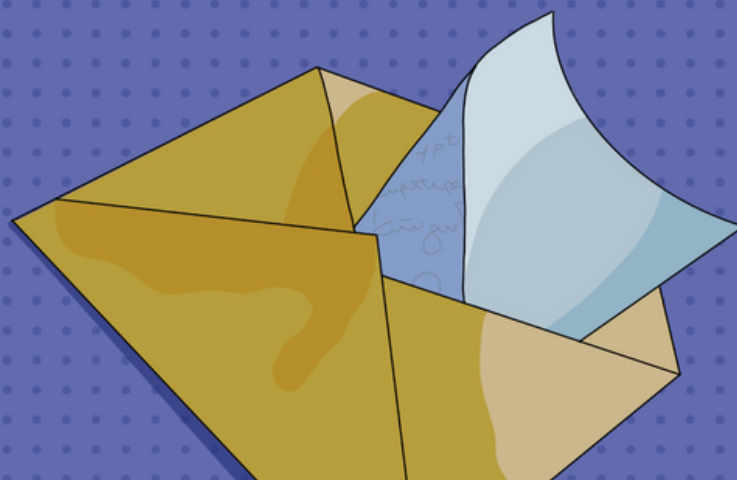
I didn't experience racism from my teachers. I had teachers I didn't like and who probably found me annoying as well, but I didn't think that me being of Roma ethnicity had anything to do with that. I've had an OK school experience.

## **HOW DID THINGS EVOLVE AS YOU AND THE PEOPLE AROUND WERE GROWING UP?**

**How were things at work?**

Once again, there were jokes being made around me, jokes like 'you're not like the rest' and stuff like that, trying to count out the ones that were present. But there were things that hurt me. Somehow, I managed to get over the racism, thinking that someone who can't get over this skin colour barrier and see beyond it is not someone whose opinion I can take into account.

I've encountered discriminatory behaviour at the workplace, but I couldn't say exactly on what criteria. I think it was a mix of being a woman, Roma and LGBT. When I was promoted, the other managers, all of them being white men, wrote a letter to our supervisor stating their disapproval regarding my promotion. I would say that in this case, the discrimination was based on sexism, but I think that me being of Roma ethnicity also played a part.



## HAVE YOU DONE SOMETHING TO GET JUSTICE?

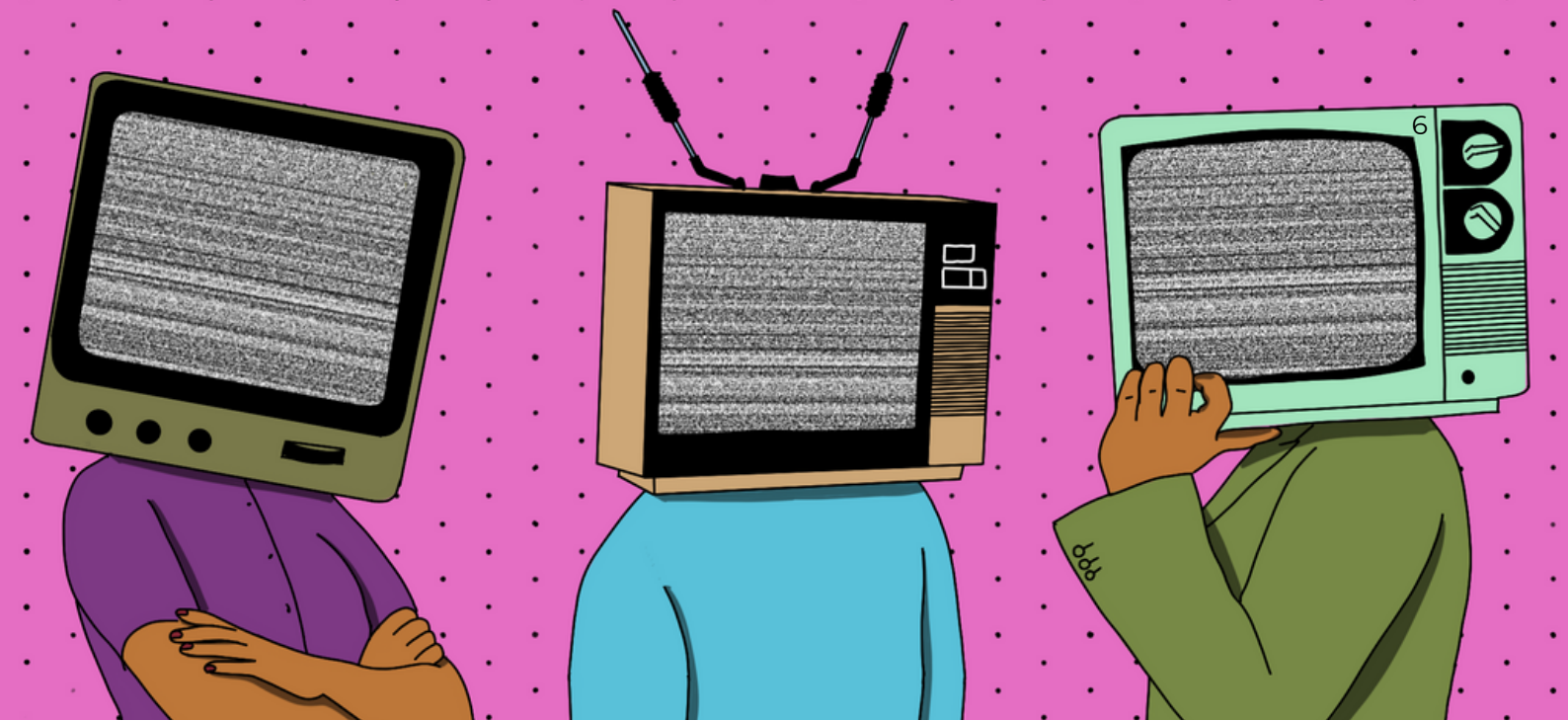
For example, pressing charges, a lawsuit etc.

I wanted to sue when I was discriminated against based on another criteria, specifically mental health, but I was out at my workplace also, so I didn't know if that contributed to it. I was fired during my sick leave for severe depression. I wanted to sue then, but I didn't have the necessary support, I didn't know who to go to, how to manage things, and, unfortunately, things were left like that.

## WHAT SHOULD THE STATE OR THE EMPLOYERS DO TO STOP THE PERPETUATION OF DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES?



A first step would be to bring them [these practices] to the public attention. It's just that very few people who've been discriminated against are willing to publicly admit it or to legally go against a company, especially when we're talking about a larger company, because they have the funds, the lawyers, they have more resources than us to fund a lawsuit and from the start you think there's no point. At least this is how I thought of it. Also, I think that another measure would be for the state to increase the awareness within public institutions, as well as private ones, regarding the LGBT community, by organising various workshops with the employers etc.



## **HOW DO YOU THINK THE ROMA AND LGBTQ PEOPLE ARE PRESENTED WITHIN THE PUBLIC SPACE?**

**What should change about people`s perception concerning these communities and individuals?**

Roma persons are being demonized within the public space. Almost everything that`s going wrong is because of Roma persons. With these current protests I see more often all kinds of memes of Roma people and ironies such as 'Open the theatres', as if Roma persons don`t go to the theatre or like there are no Roma actors or all the cultured people are white, straight and so on. And the LGBT people are harassed and more recently have been targeted by the Christian fundamentalist communities.

I would like for the media to really portray the community (both Roma, and LGBT), to promote the Roma LGBT persons that have something to say. I would like for people, in general, to come up front, as this is a really big problem. We are so badly represented within the public space. And if we don`t publicly come up front, there will be no one to represent us and they`ll portray us as they see fit.

## DO YOU FEEL ACCEPTED IN THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY FOR BEING A ROMA PERSON?

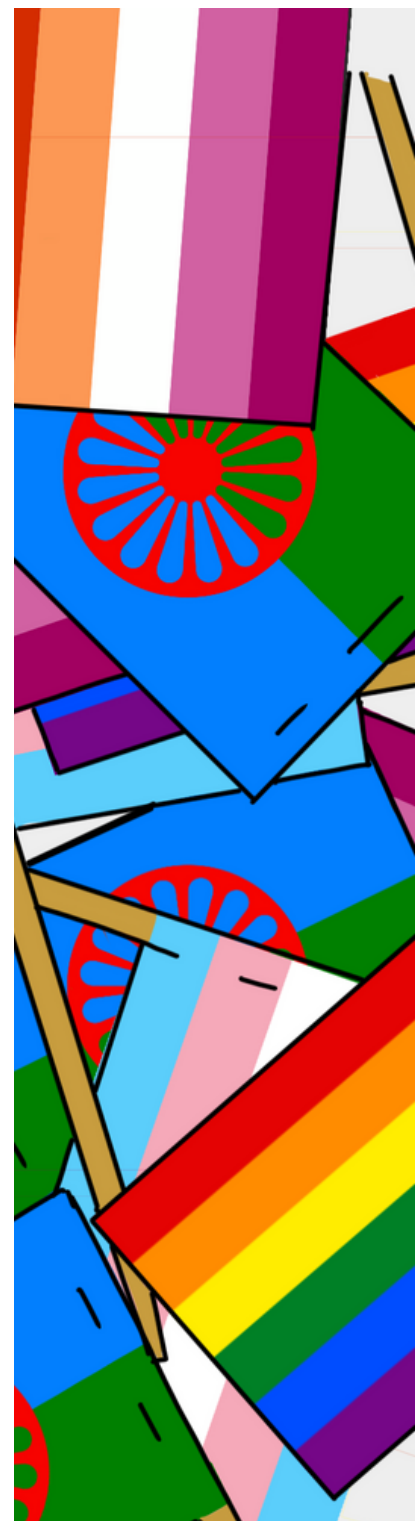
**And do you feel accepted by the Roma community for being a LGBTQ person?**

I've encountered more racism within the LGBT community than outside it. Especially from gay men. The Roma people are pretty excluded and marginalized within the LGBT community, I have Roma friends, guys, who were discriminated against based on their ethnicity. On some people's dating profiles, it is clearly stated: 'no g\*\*\*\*\*', 'no fat people'...

Once, I left my phone with a hostess in an LGBT club. Once I noticed the person left, I contacted the owner, who said that he had my phone, but he wasn't able to bring it to me and to come the following Monday to his office. This was on a Saturday... So he left me without a phone from Saturday until Monday. Just because... Here I really think it was about racial discrimination.

I don't feel accepted by the Roma community for being LGBT. I'm half Roma, I grew up with my mom, who is not Roma, and with her family. My step-grandfather on my mother's side is also Roma and I believe he's the one who had the hardest time accepting me. And my father doesn't even want to hear about it, he's in denial.

I think it's also about the woman's role dictated by the Roma society and traditions, taking care of your man, having children. Plus, the Roma community is usually also very religious, the Christian principles can play a role, and they go head-to-head against being part of the LGBT community, or at least this is how they [Roma people] see religion and how they are encouraged by the religious leaders of our times.





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**IZABELLA \\ LESBIAN ROMA**

## **IS THERE HOMOPHOBIA/ TRANSPHOBIA WITHIN THE ROMA COMMUNITY? WHAT ABOUT RACISM WITHIN THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY?**

And if so, why do you think it is happening?

Yes, of course there is. I think that a lot of the times the victim becomes the offender/ oppressor; this is what is causing minorities that turn against each other. And the level of empathy is pretty low. The fact that intersectionality exists and there are more minorities within the LGBT community... It goes unnoticed that this is a fight for human rights, not for LGBT. It's a fight that should be fought on all fronts, everyone doing their part, but mindful of the other communities as well. I think it's also about the education and how they received this message from social media... I'll go back to the idea that, a lot of times, the victim becomes the offender. I think that this illustrates most eloquently the racism within the LGBT community.

## **CAN YOU SHARE WITH US SOME HAPPY EVENTS OR MEMORIES ABOUT BEING A LESBIAN ROMA WOMAN?**

I conducted case study without even realizing it. In ninth grade, in the English class, we had a debate about LGBT and same-sex marriage and we were divided into two teams: for and against. The pro side consisted of me and two other classmates and the rest were against. We debated for a while back then, and I held on to it, so when, in twelfth grade, again in the English class, we were about to have another debate and there was no subject chosen, I suggested the same-sex marriage topic. This time, I was the one to go in front of the class and wrote 'LGBT' on the blackboard, what every letter meant, I responded to all of their questions. And then I asked them the 'magic' question: who is for, who is against?

For the pro side, more than half the class raised their hand, and no one raised their hands for being against, the rest abstained. Which to me was a really big deal. I asked the ones who changed their minds what made them reconsider and they said that me being part of their lives and having met me was as an out and real person, made them change their minds. I believe that if I hadn't been part of the LGBT community I wouldn't have had the chance to change some mentalities and I think that matters.

## **WHAT DID THE INTERSECT PROJECT MEAN TO YOU?**

**Do you feel that it has been helpful to you in any way?**

It meant meeting people like me, thinking more often about internalized homophobia and internalized racism, because they very much exist and I grew up in this society, with the same values. And I'm still fighting this internalized racism. The INTERSECT project showed me that I'm not alone and that there are more people like me out there. Thank you for doing this and for shining a light on intersectionality, not just on little pieces of people's identities.

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