



DORA'S STORY

NON-BINARY HUNGARIAN 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 DORA?

Describe yourself in a few words.

I am going to be 30 years old this year, I am Hungarian Romani and non-binary gender fluid – meaning there are times when I feel like a woman and times when I feel like a man. I grew up in an orphanage and now, I work in the field of social services because I want to support people who need help. Actually, I have been involved in activism for a long time, but until recently, I didn't know that's what it's called. For several years, I have been getting gradually more involved, helping more concretely, humans or abandoned animals alike.

WHAT WAS SCHOOL LIKE FOR YOU?

Have you felt treated differently as a result of your ethnicity or gender identity?

My experience at school was divided in three parts and most of that was spent in a special needs school because that's what the Romanian state thought was best for me, since it was the one raising me. I've never had problems with my classmates from the special needs school; on the contrary, I even made friends and we got along well. The problem came when I started middle school: I didn't have nice clothes like my other classmates because I was coming from an orphanage. I was wearing what was given to me and those clothes weren't exactly what they needed to be. Every day, I would wrap my sandwich in toilet paper and they would bring theirs in aluminium foil. These were the kinds of small things that brought out the differences between us. At one time, they even physically assaulted me. Because of this, I dropped out of school at one point. It hadn't been easy for me with the school's curriculum and I was already behind, but on top of that, I also had to deal with difficulties like these.



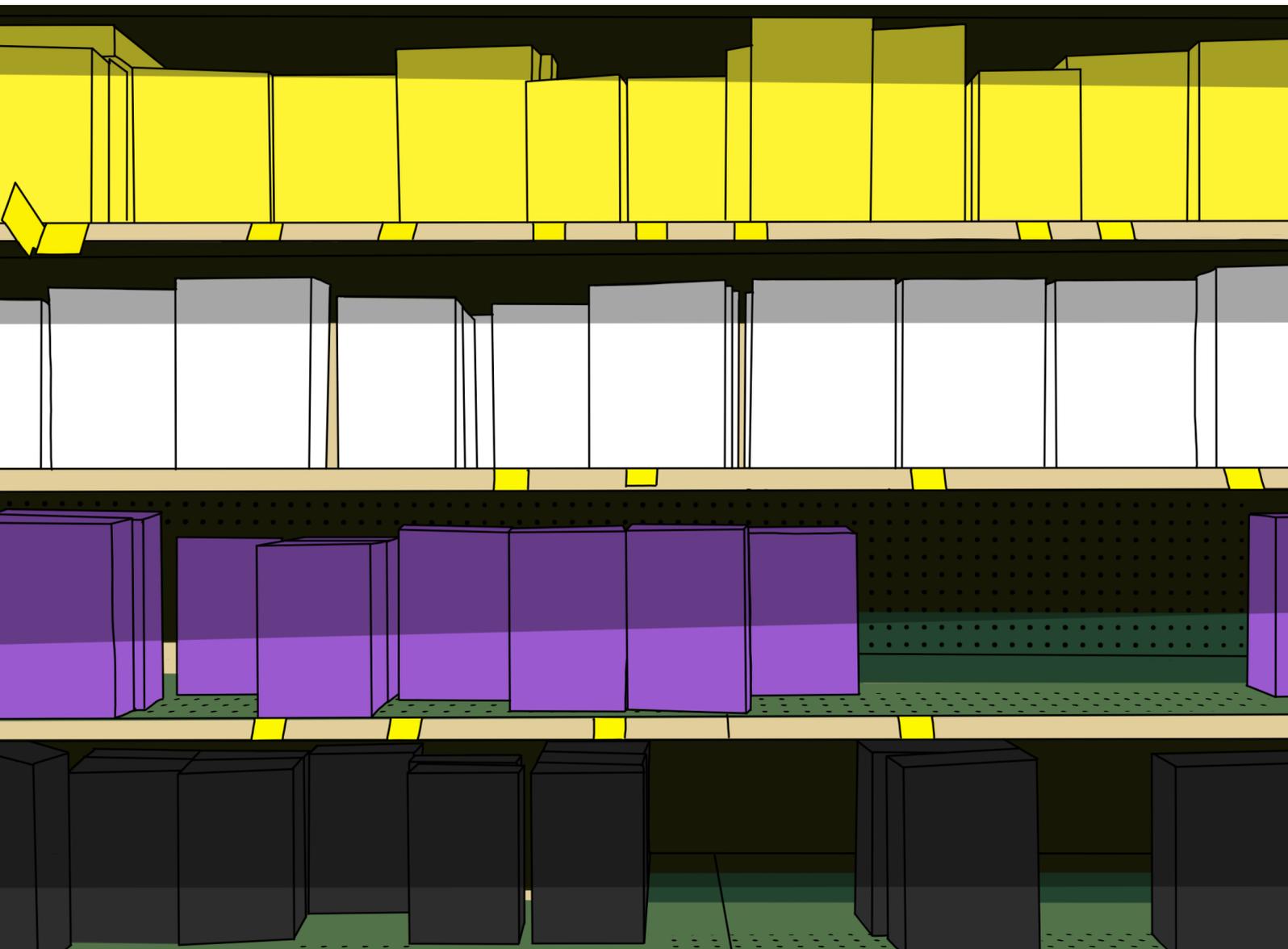


Around the age of 17, I felt for the first time that people treated me differently because I was LGBT Roma. In fact, at that age, I got a better understanding of who I really was. That is when my problems started because of the communities I belonged to. For example, when I turned 18 and I had to leave the child protection system, I started to look for a rental. On quite a few occasions, I called different property owners, we talked on the phone and got along very well, but when we met face to face, they changed their mind, usually giving excuses like "It's no longer available, something came up". I don't know if they were influenced by my gender identity because at that time I was not expressing or introducing myself as a woman too much, but I think they changed their mind because of my skin colour. I spoke with 3 or 4 landlords before I met someone who rented a place to me.

WHAT DID YOU EXPERIENCE IN THE WORKFORCE?

When I started working, it was pretty rough. I got my first job when I was 16 and I worked in various fast food restaurants, a car wash... It was quite hard for me, I couldn't stay more than a few months at a place because I felt discriminated against by my co-workers or I was assigned activities that were not my job. These things stopped once I got to my current job and now all is good, I stopped having problems like that. It's true, I don't talk about my personal life with my co-workers, we focus solely on work and I think it's better that way. But in the past, I've been mistreated a lot; I even dare to say that I've been discriminated against.

For instance, when I worked in a store, my responsibility was to bring the goods from the warehouse and organize them on the shelf, but my boss often made me do the janitor's work, wash the floor and things like that. I did many extra things that were not included in the job description and I often worked overtime without being paid. My co-workers didn't have to do all this extra stuff. It was just me that was treated differently. All this being said, I was happy to have a job because I wanted so badly to be independent. For that, I suffered a great deal of injustice, but also because I did not understand what was happening to me. I wanted a source of income, so I could afford different things. On top of that, there were times when I forgot to clock in, or I did,, but that machine didn't read my badge. By the time I realized it, my boss' log didn't account for a few days of work , even though he knew I was present at the time because he saw me. But back then, I was a child, I had no parents to protect me from my boss and I was helpless in front of him.



I UNDERSTAND THAT THERE ARE A LOT OF SITUATIONS WHEN YOU FELT WRONGED OR DISCRIMINATED AGAINST BECAUSE OF YOUR ETHNICITY OR GENDER IDENTITY.

Would you like to share with us some of these incidents?

The problem that I am most often confronted with and that concerns me the most is how I am treated by the Romanian police. On many occasions I've been stopped on the street and was told that I looked suspicious, without being given a reason - I suppose it is because of my skin colour. An unfortunate event was when I took a taxi from in front of a club and the taxi driver asked me for a surcharge of 50 lei, even if the meter showed 12 lei for the ride. When I gave him 12 lei, the driver locked the doors and started to yell at me. I was getting scared, so I called the police. When the police showed up, the taxi driver unlocked the doors, I got out of the car and explained the situation to the policeman, but he went to talk with the driver instead. I went home with the consent of the policeman. After a while, when I went to the Town Hall, to pay my taxes, I was surprised to find out that I got a 2000 lei fine that night for calling the police for no good reason. I had all the reasons to call the police, because I was in fact held against my will. To make matters worse, the law says that for calling the police for no reason, the fine is 1000 lei, but they fined me 2000 lei, double the required amount.

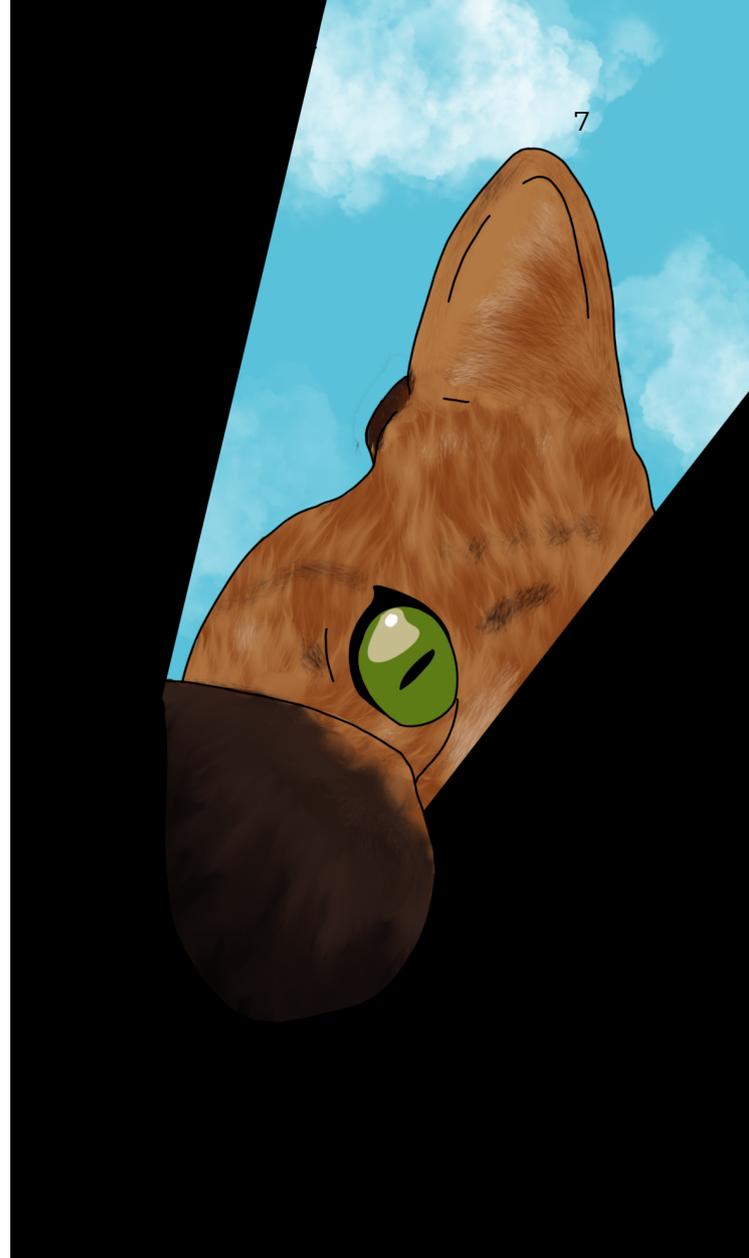


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I had another negative experience at the last place I lived in, where my neighbours stole my cat. At that same place, friends of mine, drag queens, trans people etc. - used to come visit me and one of my neighbours kept picking on them, calling them names and spitting at them. I had other neighbours who knew me and knew what type of person I was: that I was cleaning the common yard and the buildings staircase all by myself, and I was minding my own business. But many had something against me, they didn't like me. They even said it once straight in my face: "we do not want you here, we do not like g****s or gays". At some point, the neighbours wrote a petition against me, even if they did not have a good reason to do so. But they claimed that all these friends of mine were having sexual intercourse in my house.



DID YOU TAKE ANY ACTION TO SET THINGS STRAIGHT LEGALLY?

Have they been resolved in any way?

I called the police a few times about the issues with the neighbours, I wrote complaints... The police told the neighbours that what they accused me of didn't constitute a valid reason for me to get charged with anything even if their claims were true (which they weren't) everyone has the right to do anything they want in their house as long as they are not a disturbance to others.. For 4-5 years I kept going to the police and at one point, a police officer told me that "your neighbours do not have any reason to pick on you, they just don't want you there".

Once I filed a complaint because a neighbour physically assaulted me and a friend of mine, but nothing came of it. I guess they „lost” my complaint. In fact, I filed a lot of complaints in my life, but nothing has been resolved. I am used to fighting, but when the police are discouraging you constantly, there’s little to be done. Just recently I found support in these actions, through NGOs like CLR and MozaiQ, for example, because a while ago I didn’t have any support. I couldn’t afford a lawyer; I didn’t know the laws or my rights. I am glad that I could challenge, with the help of CRJ, the fine I received after the incident with the taxi driver, but the trial hasn’t concluded yet.

DO YOU KNOW OF SIMILAR INCIDENTS AND INJUSTICES THAT HAVE HAPPENED TO YOUR ROMA AND/OR LGBTQ FRIENDS OR ACQUAINTANCES?

To be honest, it’s not just me. I have Roma friends and co-workers who are stopped by police on the street without a reason or the Uber driver refuses to pick them up when he sees them. Another person told me that one evening they weren’t feeling well and had severe chest pain. They went to several hospitals but nobody check them in. Eventually, they got some pills at a pharmacy and a recommendation for a specific hospital. There have also been cases of the police confiscating belongings of Roma people because they claim you must prove you bought them. Once, a Roma kid from the orphanage had a scooter and a policeman stopped him on the street to ask him where he got it from. He explained to him a social worker at the orphanage bought it for him, but the policeman refused to let him go and make him call the lady, who confirmed that the scooter was in fact the kid’s. The social worker asked the policeman “do you really think that everybody who is Romani steals?”. These are just some terrible things...



DO YOU FEEL ACCEPTED BY THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY AS A ROMA PERSON?

How about being accepted by the Roma community as a non-binary person?

Personally, since I started to be more known in the LGBT community, I stopped having issues in the community, but before that, it wasn't very easy for me. For example, a while ago, it was hard for both me and my Romani friends to get into the gay clubs. That is probably because they are Romani and they don't have the most expensive clothes or wear the finest perfumes. We had a situation where a cell phone was stolen in the club and the first person the security guards came to was me. The club staff got used to me as a woman and they treat me well. But another time, when I went to the club as a guy (without hair extensions and make-up), I was assaulted in the bathroom by the club staff who checked even my underwear to see if I stole a cell phone.

Regarding the Romani community, I feel accepted 80% of the time, but I am sure that many LGBTQ Romani people have trouble being accepted.

HOW DO YOU SEE ACTIVISM IN GENERAL AND THE INTERSECT PROJECT IN PARTICULAR?

Both of them helped me a lot from a legal point of view in dealing with different issues. Also, my co-workers and I received financial support for [working on] projects for LGBTQ and Romani communities and that was much appreciated. Recently I started working with E-Romnja as well. All these experiences make me feel that I am not alone on this path, that we are a team fighting for our rights and I have gained a lot of confidence in myself and my abilities.

DO YOU WANT TO SHARE SOME FINAL THOUGHTS AND ADVICE, FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC OR THE LGBTQ AND/OR ROMANI COMMUNITY?

I think we need to talk more in the public space about the qualities of Roma and LGBTQ people, about what makes them unique, their abilities and their careers. We should be talking about us in a positive manner as well. At the same time, people must understand the kind of problems we face and the fact that we are not monsters, we have a heart too.

I think we are on the right path as a society, but I also think that we, the LGBTQ community, should support the less educated members, who are more vulnerable because they didn't have the chance to go to school at all, or don't have higher education... We should bring them to the spotlight more and help them too. The majority of people that I see [active] in the community lately are well educated people, while nobody knows the most vulnerable, Roma people (and not only Roma); nobody is asking them anything. We should be more thorough, and not restrict ourselves to the intellectual community. In my work, I try to speak to a broader audience, from people who haven't finished elementary school to those with bachelor and master degrees. We all have the right and the need to be informed.

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