

Booklet on combating hate speech

Roma minority

Project implemented by



Background

Hate speech remains a pressing matter, both in Romania and at a European level. The situation has gotten worse, especially because during the pandemic, ethnic minorities and vulnerable groups have been scapegoated and blamed for spreading the virus.[1]



Are stereotypes and prejudices forms of hate speech?

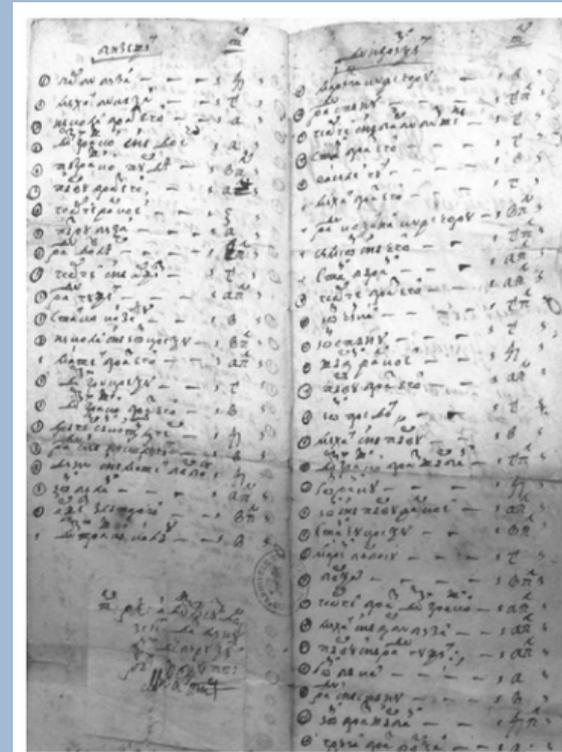
Roma people are often seen through the lens of several stereotypes and prejudices that cause further discrimination and perpetuate racism. Anti-Roma racism is one of the most deeply-rooted forms of racism[2] within the European mentality. However, the phenomenon of how this racism is carried on is insufficiently studied. While several studies address the discrimination, inequality, rights deprivation, and poverty, many of them neglect to mention racism as the root cause of all of these manifestations.

According to social psychology, a stereotype represents “a generalized belief about a particular group of people, in which certain characteristics are attributed to all members of the group regardless of their real nuanced identities”. These are mostly negative, but there are some stereotypes which can be considered positive. E.g.: ‘Black people are good at sports.’ However, both negative and ‘positive’ stereotypes lead to prejudice, which is understood as a far more complex phenomenon, and is “a negative or hostile attitude towards a certain group of people, strictly based on belonging to this group. Thus, prejudice involves a combination of emotions and cognitions, namely a set of previous knowledge, beliefs, and behavioral tendencies”. [3]

Moreover, people tend to retain information, behaviors and actions which confirm their own pre-existent beliefs. For example, if a man and a woman take the same math exam, and the woman receives a lower score, one's sexist beliefs could be "confirmed", which can be triggered by the belief that "all women are less intelligent than men and, in this case, not good at math".[4]



Roma people are the most discriminated against minority in Romania, constantly having to face prejudice and stereotypes alike. Often used to justify the hostility and anti-Roma sentiments, these stereotypes and prejudices have been forming since the settlement of Roma people in Romania's geographical space — from the period of 500 years during which they were enslaved in the Wallachia and Moldavia regions. The stereotypes and prejudices are historical in nature and were used to justify anti-Roma laws[5] and anti-Roma behaviors and can even be found in literature and different other fields. Some of these stereotypes and prejudices changed or evolved over time, but all of them were formed on assumptions and racist attitudes about what is perceived to be “the g*psy image”. [6] For example, the Roma are portrayed as “the other /the oriental, the one who is unable to adapt, the deviant, the thief, backwards[7] and uncivilized, the rapist, the hypersexualized, or the child kidnapper”.



“May 8th 1782, Tismana XCVII/17 Registry of g*psyies owned by Tismana Monastery in Mehedinți County, for the summer tax” Source: screenshot, ikultura.ro [8]

With the goal of dismantling and fighting against some of the anti-Roma racism manifestations including hate speech, I chose to talk about both positive and negative stereotyping as a form of oppression.

In general, stereotypes tend to be cast collectively, but there are also examples of gender-based stereotypes. Unlike Roma men, Roma women can be the subject of different categories of stereotyping.

- Negative stereotypes and prejudices: thieves, liars, loud, aggressive
- Positive” stereotypes: charming, free-spirited, talented at music, “close to nature”, mysterious, witchy, esoteric, oversexualized, hotblooded and sexually available.

In the following pages, we will deconstruct five common myths (stereotypes and prejudices) which are often used to justify hate speech.





Deconstructing myths

Myth: Roma women are hotblooded.

“Roma women are hotblooded and sexually available, mysterious, exotic, charming witches and husband thieves.”

Fact: The hypersexualization of Roma women dates back to slavery[9], when they were treated as the property of their owners and considered pagan and impure, unlike the white and pious Romanian women. This stereotype, which is often wrongly interpreted as positive, has grave repercussions on the representation of Roma women.

It is the projection of a sexist and racist society who physically assaulted and raped them, under the pretext of purifying their bodies. This power dynamic of owner and slave is maintained in a heteronormative and predominantly white society, in which Roma women are still stereotyped, denied their rights and exposed to a higher risk of human trafficking [10], prostitution and begging.



Highlight:

The hypersexualization of women who belong to minority groups isn't an isolated phenomenon; studies across the world show that minority women, such as Women of color [11], Native American women or Latinas etc. have been and continue to be subject of fetishization and exoticification.



Myth: Roma women bear many children in order to collect social aid and benefits.

This prejudice involves two components, one that refers to the stereotype of large Roma families, and one that assumes Roma people are lazy and choose to live as freeloaders in an attempt to cheat the Romanian state. Thus, Roma are portrayed as parasites who are only able to live because the state takes pity on them, while they in return bring no contributions as “good citizens”.

Fact: On a general level, the lack of sexual education is something all women in Romania face. But when it comes to impoverished and oppressed women [12] who belong to minority groups, this lack of education has an even deeper impact. Thus, the marginalization of Roma communities has negative consequences for everyone, but especially for Roma women.



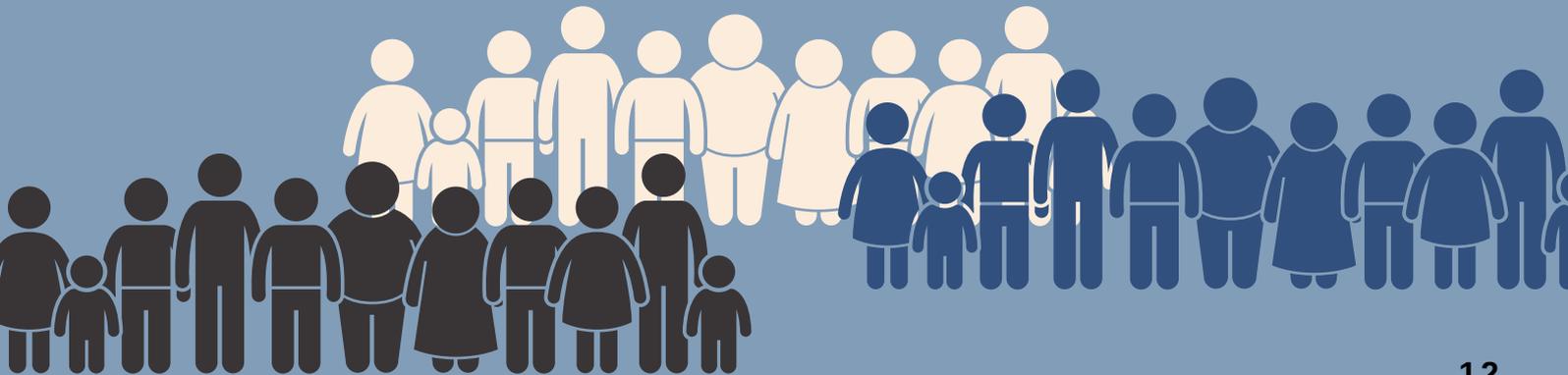


Basically, one cannot address the issue of pregnancies, without pinpointing the studies that highlight the fact that Roma women suffer from intersectional discrimination and therefore, navigate between sexism, racism and classism. [13] Because of this, they live in a state of marginalization [14] and are denied essential services such as healthcare, education and employment support from the state. An impoverished Roma woman who belongs to a marginalized or segregated community, without a formal workplace, is in a different position compared to a white, middle class woman who is educated and has access to opportunities and resources. Therefore, because of poverty [15] and all the previously mentioned aspects, Roma women and girls do not have access to a stable socio-economic environment or support when it comes to reproductive decisions.





Oftentimes, “culture” [16] is invoked to justify the non-interference of authorities in terms of ensuring the safety of Roma girls and women [17] (e.g.: possible early marriages [18] or the lack of access to health services). This issue has nothing to do with ethnicity, but is rather the result of extreme poverty, marginalization, a lack of education and support. Women of Roma ethnicity do not have multiple children in order to cheat the system, they are however the most disadvantaged citizens and do not receive enough support from the state to reach their full potential.



Highlight:

Within our society, the pregnancy of a non-Roma woman is seen as a source of joy, while a Roma woman's pregnancy is seen as a threat. Roma women are perceived and portrayed as women who bear and want many children. This stereotype dates back to centuries of slavery, when they were forced to have children in order to ensure a large number of slave workers.[19] When it comes to the bodies and decisions of Roma women, circumstances and context may influence their actions and rob them of choice, even though every woman should have the right to make decisions for herself.





Myth: Roma don't want to send their children to school.

“Roma parents do not want to send their children to school. They don't want to integrate, they prefer living isolated, in separated communities. They would rather send their kids off to be beggars. They choose to be illiterate.”

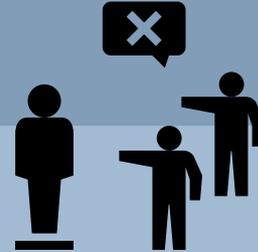
Fact:

Nine (9) out of 10 Roma school-aged children from countries with large Roma populations are enrolled in school, respectively 8 out of 10 in Romania.[20] Thus, this modern prejudice against Roma parents is, in fact, often invoked when the educational system fails to meet the needs and guarantee the rights of Roma children. On the spectrum of difficulties Roma people have to deal with, children — especially Roma girls — are the most vulnerable.



Why aren't all Roma children included in the educational system?

Discrimination: Roma children are subject to constant, daily, repeated discrimination; [21]



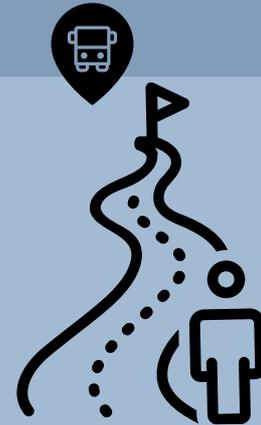
Fear: Roma children are three times more likely to be the victim of racism and bullying within the education system;

Work and poverty: Unfortunately, because of poverty, many Roma children have to perform chores around their household, taking care of siblings or joining in on agricultural work, fruit commerce, etc.



Why aren't all Roma children included in the educational system?

Marginalization and lack of proper transport: The majority of Roma communities live in ghettos, segregated settlements and collectives, often on the outskirts of cities. These housing situations are a huge impediment, since in most cases there is no public transport available and parents are afraid to send their children off to school, to walk alone for such long distances;



A passive system: the disinterest and lack of support shown by the state play a significant role in the decision of Roma parents “to not send their children to school”.^[22] The state offers no support and no real solutions to address the high percentage of absenteeism and dropout amongst Roma children.

Oftentimes, Roma parents themselves were deprived of access to education, as they come from generations marked by illiteracy, stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty, being unable or unsure how to access the resources needed for their children's development. Despite all these systemic limitations, both social and educational, Roma parents want to give their children a good education and to provide a better life for them.





Myth: Roma people are beggars.

“Roma people like begging, it is their culture and they would rather be beggars than make an honest living.”

Fact: This is another stereotype with historic roots[23] which was “revitalized” when Romania joined the European Union in 2007. Following this event, a lot of Romanians emigrated to various western countries, to earn a better living. Among them were people of Roma ethnicity[24], who ended up performing several informal street jobs, such as recycling plastic bottles, selling newspapers or flowers, playing street music, but some were also begging.

(more information on the same myth ->)

Fact:

The preconception that Roma are only good at begging was strongly promoted and consolidated by mass-media[25] both in Romania and across Europe, first by political actors, and then circulated by society at large. It reinforces the image of Roma as “parasites who take advantage of people’s pity and generosity”. They are portrayed as “lazy, lacking any morals or shame” and villainized for trying to survive. Hence, the activity of begging comes to be seen as an inherent trait, and not a direct consequence of poverty, wherein people who lack any sort of resources, access to education or options in the job market look for ways to survive. Studies confirm that begging is simply another consequence of extreme poverty, the lived reality of some Roma people who live in Romania, and not a common practice universally present. [26]



Myth: Roma people are criminals/ thieves.

“*They would rather steal than work, you cannot trust them, their goal is to cheat the system, they are criminals by nature, crime is in their blood.*”

Fact: “Roma are criminals” is one of the oldest and most widespread prejudices, not only in Romania but all across Europe. The first anti-Roma law [27] was passed in Germany, describing them as criminals and untrustworthy. As years went by, this prejudice changed shape, but it never really went away. Nazi ideology portrayed Roma as racially impure criminals, and between 200,000 and 500,000 of them were killed [28] in the Holocaust as a result of such racial profiling. In Romania, as a direct consequence of the ethnic-cleansing policies passed by the Ion Antonescu government, 25,000 Roma people (half of which were children) were deported [29] to Transnistria [30]. Approximately 11,000 of them died.

(more information on the same myth ->)

Fact:

Nowadays, this extremely dangerous myth is often still used and perpetuated, not only by political leaders, but also by mass-media and by society as a whole. It ignores the unsubstantiated claim that there are biological implications associating ethnicity and criminality. It also ignores the numerous studies which show that a person affected by poverty, with no means to exit this vicious cycle, can end up committing crimes in order to survive.



And even though these prejudices are fascist in nature and are only rooted in racism, they continue to exist and are used as justification for the mistreatment of Roma people, as if their rights did not exist or could easily be denied.

Reflections

Roma people are often seen as a unitary group, and not as individuals, as different persons. This phenomenon aggravates and worsens Roma people's predicament, because even though some of them share values, a culture, features, a language etc, they remain individuals with unique stories and experiences. Therefore, the work required to deconstruct these myths, so deeply rooted in our collective mentality, must be founded on the sustained effort to see Roma as individuals and not as a collective. This will also play an important role in the fight against hate speech.



Important! Publicly reclaiming their identity



The mark of suffering (Urma suferinței) by Marian Petre, 2002
Source: screenshot, ikultura.ro [31]

Often, the identity of Roma people remains uncelebrated, because of the high degree of racism they are subject to both on an individual and collective level. However, despite all the injustices and historic tragedies they had to face, in recent years Roma people have tried to rebuild a community where they can be proud of their identities. They have many reasons to feel proud. They survived the longest period of slavery in Europe, they survived the Holocaust, and in Romania they are a clear example of strength and resilience. Roma people have brought a significant contribution to Romanian heritage and folklore, they built churches and monuments during slavery, and today they are the largest and oldest European minority.

How to combat Roma stereotypes?



- Be critical
- Read, experiment, interact, form your own opinion
- Listen to and amplify Roma voices
- Consume media which cites official and non-racist sources
- Meet new people, be open and learn from diversity
- Recognize your position and privilege (if it exists)
- Condemn racism and its manifestations
- Hold people responsible for their racism and hate speech
- Speak against any form of racism, stereotypes and prejudice

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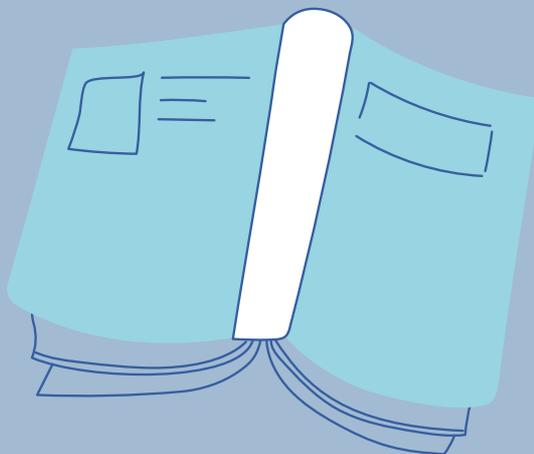
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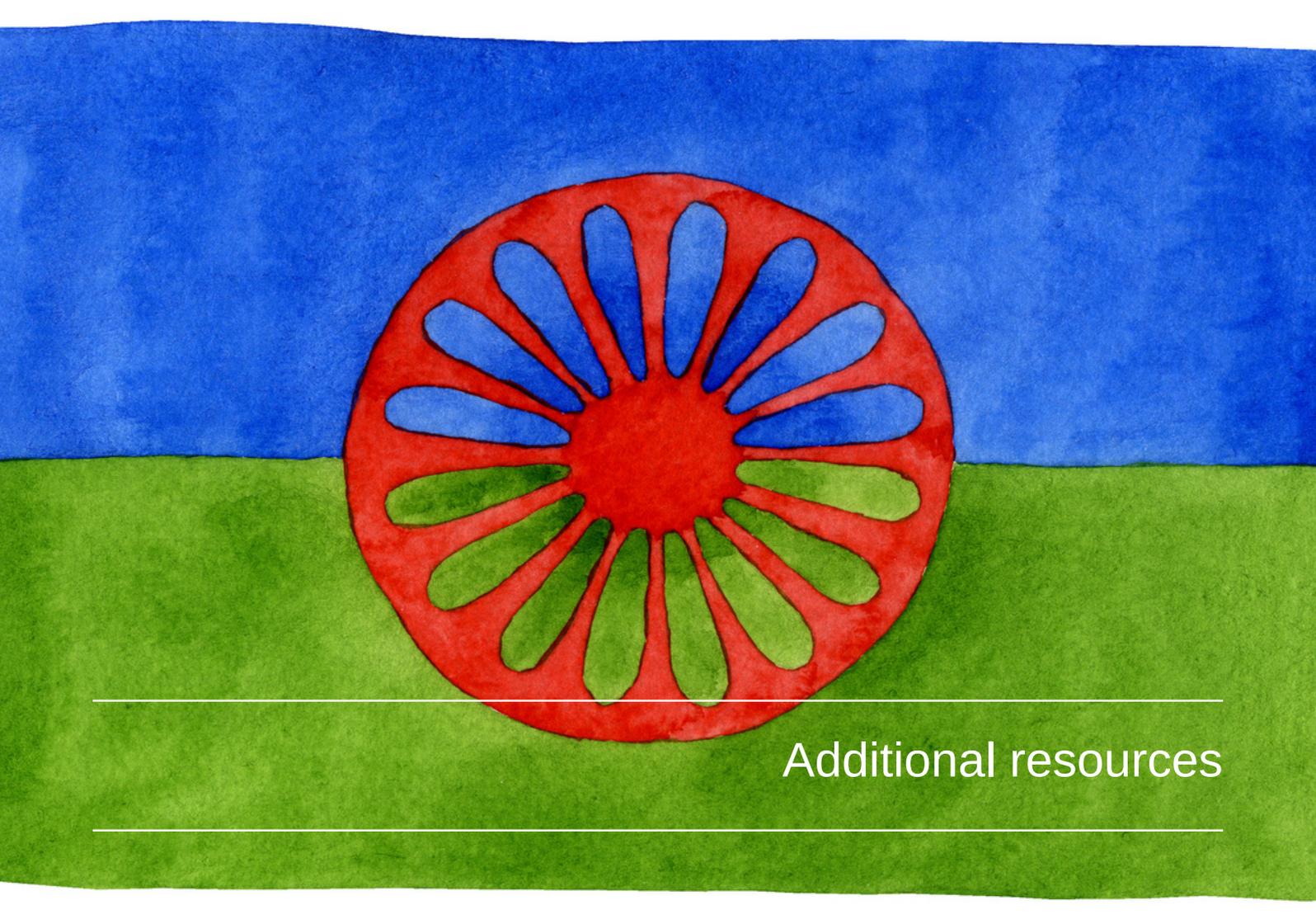
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Additional resources

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Discrimination against Roma children in education

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- Sebijan Feizula, *Lupta Roma: de la proteste la emancipare politică* [The Roma struggle: from protests to political emancipation], ro.baricada.org

Intersectionality

- ALEXANDRA OPREA, *The Erasure of Romani Women*, kopachi.com
- Kimberlé Crenshaw, *The intersectionality wars*, vox.com



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More about the project **Non-discrimination, beyond words** project:
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