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## An Opinion about the White Narratives' impact on Romani<sup>1</sup> Women

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#### Abstract

This subjective opinion from a Romani woman explores the impact of white narratives, which often overlook Romani women's experiences, voices, and needs, perpetuating inequalities, harmful stereotypes, social and economic marginalization, and victimization. The piece argues that society is predominantly controlled by wealthy 'white' individuals with great power and influence, imposing a history of oppressive and unjust systems, structures, policies, and narratives favoring them. The piece concludes by emphasizing the need to decolonize these narratives, create space and initiatives to redistribute resources and power and ensure that Romani women's voices are included in mainstream discourses.

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#### An Opinion about the White Narratives' impact on Romani<sup>2</sup> Women

*Warning: Understanding this personal opinion (from a Romani woman) requires extensive self-reflection and openness; their lack might cause some readers to feel uncomfortable, offended, or even threatened.<sup>3</sup>*

We all live in a society that was created, maintained, and dominated by people, decision-makers who have power, i.e., wealthy cis, hetero 'white' individuals, primarily men. This male-dominated, patriarchal society was intentionally structured and constructed to be unequal and unjust, where historical events (forced assimilation, slavery, segregation,

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<sup>1</sup> Roma are the largest ethnic group in Europe. Their origins are traced back to northern India, specifically to the regions now known as Rajasthan and Punjab. Over the centuries, they traveled through Persia, the Byzantine Empire into Europe and the Americas. The average estimate for the number of Roma throughout Europe is approximately 12 million. Roma are heterogeneous groups with many terminologies and identities, including the Roma, Sinti, Kale, Travellers, the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), and people identifying as Gypsies. Council of Europe Descriptive Glossary of terms relating to Roma issues. 2012 May. [https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Glossary\\_Roma\\_18May2012\\_CoE.pdf](https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Glossary_Roma_18May2012_CoE.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Roma are the largest ethnic group in Europe. Their origins are traced back to northern India, specifically to the regions now known as Rajasthan and Punjab. Over the centuries, they traveled through Persia, the Byzantine Empire into Europe and the Americas. The average estimate for the number of Roma throughout Europe is approximately 12 million. Roma are heterogeneous groups with many terminologies and identities, including the Roma, Sinti, Kale, Travellers, the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), and people identifying as Gypsies. Council of Europe Descriptive Glossary of terms relating to Roma issues. 2012 May. [https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Glossary\\_Roma\\_18May2012\\_CoE.pdf](https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Glossary_Roma_18May2012_CoE.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The author of the text does not aim to offend the recipient but to raise awareness and invite them to get an insight into the broad knowledge, first-hand experience, and personal perspective of a Romani woman.

genocide, hate crimes against Roma), policies, and regulations mostly favored and were beneficial to the 'white' population, leading to a disproportionate distribution and accumulation of wealth, power, and resources among them. ([Studies](#) show that 'white' men hold most executive positions in Fortune 500 companies, dominate political leadership positions and media ownership in many countries.) In these systems, narratives and discourses are also led by 'white' people, which have long influenced society's perception and the knowledge production of Romani communities, especially Romani women. For some (those who benefit from these systems of privileges and find it challenging to accept historical and ongoing social inequalities), these facts might be a bitter and hard pill to swallow.

A common reaction as part of the 'white' narratives when discussing ethnicity-related topics and racial injustices is white fragility, the switch on of a self-defensive mode. When their biased assumptions, behaviors, or privileges are challenged, some 'white' people often produce responses of anger, fear, guilt, argumentation, silence, self-defense, and withdrawal, which lead to maintaining racial inequalities and shutting down meaningful discussions about racism.<sup>4</sup> Generally, the arguments come up stating that the "US" and "THEM" narratives further divide and polarize society (can be true) or "we are all human beings and skin color does not make a difference" (a non-logical, counterproductive idea of colorblindness).<sup>5</sup>

These reactions raise a question: Do society and these narratives genuinely reflect people's different identities, needs, lived experiences, and reality? Obviously not. The "US" and "THEM" discourse, as a dividing force, does not originate from Roma (or any oppressed groups) but comes from white saviors, colonizers, enslavers, and leaders trying to fix our communities instead of their biased systems and mindset. It is sad, absurd, and ridiculous that for many decades, institutions, governments, policies, and initiatives still view and label Roma as a problem or a burden that must be fixed, saved, or civilized instead of addressing and correcting their flawed systems, structures, practices, and ineffective, hypocritical, so-called half solutions upholding inequalities and injustices.

Throughout [history](#), Romani people have faced anti-gypsyism,<sup>6</sup> widespread discrimination, persecution, forced assimilation, slavery, and the Roma Holocaust during World War II. White-centric discourses often lead to the treatment of Roma as an alleged alien group

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Robin DiAngelo (2020) *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.

<sup>5</sup> Burke, M. (2018). *Colorblind racism*. John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>6</sup> Since 2005, the Council of Europe has made explicit reference to "anti-gypsyism" as a specific form of racism, and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) also acknowledged the particular nature of the racism directed towards Roma being permanent, systematic, maintained by institutional practices and policies and persistent both historically and geographically. Anti-Gypsyism is a form of systematic racism that is deeply embedded in European societies, manifesting in various ways, from overt acts of violence and discrimination to more subtle forms of exclusion, such as biased media representation and unequal access to education, healthcare, and employment. The term anti-Roma racism was adopted by the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance \(IHRA\)](#) as a legally non-binding definition in 2020. Anti-Roma racism is „a manifestation of individual expressions and acts as well as institutional policies and practices of marginalization, exclusion, physical violence, devaluation of Roma cultures and lifestyles, and hate speech directed at Roma as well as other individuals and groups perceived, stigmatized, or persecuted during the Nazi era, and still today, as “Gypsies.” Council of Europe Descriptive Glossary of terms relating to Roma issues. 2012 May. [https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Glossary\\_Roma\\_18May2012\\_CoE.pdf](https://childrenofprisoners.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Glossary_Roma_18May2012_CoE.pdf)

and associate them with a series of pejorative stereotypes<sup>7</sup> and distorted images that represent a specific form of racism.”<sup>8</sup> Postcolonial societies also reinforce the universal dominance of white narratives, which sustain racial hierarchies and spread the marginalization of non-white identities, even after the formal end of colonial rule. These biased white narratives on Roma perpetuate negative images that justify systemic discriminatory practices and policies, leading to social exclusion, economic marginalization, and psychological trauma, which inhibit Roma from accessing essential services, finding steady jobs, and fully participating in and contributing to society.<sup>9</sup>

Romani women's circumstances and experiences regarding their body, sexual and reproductive health and rights, socioeconomic situation, education, employment, housing, feminism, and inclusion into mainstreams are often overshadowed by white narratives and biased practices profoundly affecting their lives and conditions, contributing to the cycles of poverty and exclusion. Recently, WOC (women of color) and Romani women activists have drawn more [attention](#) to the [criticism](#) of white narratives and practices, shifting the center of discourses to reflect intersectionality and society's diversity. This subjective opinion piece aims to provide food for thought, exploring some aspects of these white narratives.<sup>10</sup>

### **What are white narratives?**

The term 'white' as a sociological concept does not exclusively refer to skin color or members of the majority society identified as white but to privileges, class, and socio-economic status. In our society, where racial inequalities and discrimination persist, these individuals often enjoy unearned privileges, power, and societal advantages embedded in racially biased social systems and institutions that remain unseen by those who benefit from them, such as easier access to education or professional opportunities, more media representation, or a lower likelihood of being profiled by police.

The word 'white' as a category can cause discomfort among those identifying with the group because, unlike the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), WOC, and Romani communities, they are not accustomed to being the object of research, defined or described by their socioeconomic traits, positions, and status. The scientific and academic examination of the 'white' is a relatively new field and was more widely recognized

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<sup>7</sup> Anstead, A. (2013.) The stereotypes used against Eastern Europe are as old as they are wrong. <https://www.newstatesman.com/business/economics/2013/05/stereotypes-used-against-eastern-europe-are-old-they-are-wrong>

<sup>8</sup> The USA Department of State. 2020. The Working Definition of Anti-Roma Racism\* <https://www.state.gov/defining-anti-roma-racism/>

<sup>9</sup> Postcolonial influences and racism can also negatively impact majority societies because excluding any group from full participation leads to losing potential contributions in various fields, from culture and arts to science, politics, and industry. Inclusive and diverse societies tend to be more innovative, resilient, and thus productive. Hence, it is highly needed to dismantle these deeply rooted white-centric discourses to address the inequalities faced by the Roma and other marginalized groups, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society. López, A.J. (2005). Postcolonial whiteness: A critical reader on race and empire.

<sup>10</sup> Kóczé, A., Zentai, V., Jovanović, J., & Vincze, E. (Eds.). (2018). *The Romani women's movement: struggles and debates in Central and Eastern Europe*. Routledge.

sociologically when the critical race theory (CRT)<sup>11</sup> used the construct to better interpret power relations and societal dynamics. Before, a previously unnamed group (yes, the 'white') was naturally considered the primary reference point, the default, and the norm in every field: business, education, housing, employment, healthcare, and even the beauty industry. Hence, many 'white' people might feel mad, embarrassed, and confused because they are not used to having their dominant position pointed out, analyzed, questioned, or criticized.<sup>12</sup>

'White narrative' can be associated with social, cultural, economic, or political structures and perspectives that primarily portray and center the interests, values, and experiences of 'white' people, marginalizing or invalidating other groups, such as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), Roma, WOC (Women of Color), LGBTQI+ communities and people with disabilities. White narratives contain the stories, standards, and interpretations of events or history that uphold and reinforce the status quo of white dominance. These narratives often exist because society has a white centrality on historical and structural levels (representation, participation, resources, norms), resulting in systematic racism and oppression.<sup>13</sup>

### **White Narratives and Romani Women**

White narratives have long influenced women of color from various backgrounds, including African, African-American, Asian, Indian, Arabic, and beyond. However, Romani women are often invisible and have been overlooked or forgotten. In the American context, the Roma as an ethnic group mostly remains unrecognized, usually seen to be labeled with the misleading term 'gypsy,' incorrectly suggesting a voluntary decision or a lifestyle that individuals can choose when living in a nomadic, boho, free-spirit, and carefree way. This oversimplification neglects to learn, recognize, and acknowledge the existence of Romani communities as ethnic groups, the complexities of their intersectional identities, and their historical struggles, thus lacking solidarity towards them.

Despite the lack of worldwide recognition, oppression has globally shared systems, forms, and impacts; thus, the similarities in the experiences of Romani women with other women of color are undeniable. In Europe, white narratives have historically shaped societal perceptions of Romani women with prejudices and stereotypes running deep into the eras of colonialism and post-colonialism, during which European powers subjected the Romani population to oppression, enslavement, segregation, and systematic extermination. White narratives have also contributed to the invisibility and misrepresentation of Romani groups, with the influence of those in power shaping historical narratives. These narratives and actions have not only marginalized and dehumanized Romani people but have also

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<sup>11</sup> Critical Race theory originated in the USA during the 1970s, and it examines the intersection of race and racism in politics, culture, and law and states that racism is not just a product of individual bias but is embedded in legal systems and policies, perpetuating social inequalities. Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2023). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (Vol. 87). NYU Press.

<sup>12</sup> Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2023). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (Vol. 87). NYU press.

<sup>13</sup> Ullucci, K. (2012). Knowing we are White: Narrative as critical praxis. *Teaching Education*, 23(1), 89-107.

reinforced white norms, white-washed and white-centric knowledge production, perpetuating sexism and racism directed at Romani women.<sup>14</sup>

### **Exoticization and Sexualization**

Romani women often become the subject of oversexualized and exoticized images in white narratives. These narratives usually represent stereotypical and patronizing images of the bodies and sexuality of Romani women, portraying them as temperamental, instinctive, barbaric creatures and sexual objects, perpetuating harmful sexual myths that fit into the stereotype of the "seductive gypsy."<sup>15</sup> Orientalism<sup>16</sup> spread through pop culture and various other mediums, such as movies, music, cartoons, and art, especially in the Romantic period. Conversely, Romani women are also seen as overly controlled individuals by outdated, primitive traditions or sexist, patriarchal Romani men questioning their bodily autonomy. In both cases, Romani women's bodies and sexuality are to conform to white, patriarchal norms, which has a powerful impact on their identities and social positions.

The perception of sexual freedom and reproductive rights of Romani women is limited due to a lack of Romani perspective in research, stigmas, and stereotypes spread by white narratives leading the discourse. In reality, Romani women lack access to essential services and resources. Concerning healthcare, they face obstetric violence, physical and verbal abuse, unequal, discriminatory treatment, and even forced sterilization. Some consequences of medical neglect and misconduct include reduced life expectancy, psychological trauma, and death, leading to a lack of trust in health institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Another outstanding issue is that white norms in general medicine often overlook the specific health needs of Romani individuals with brown and dark skin. Doctors are typically trained to recognize certain skin diseases in 'white'-skinned individuals, which can lead to the misdiagnosis and mistreatment of brown or dark-skinned patients. Some individuals even hold the biased view that brown or dark skin is less sensitive, thicker, and more resistant, perpetuating scientific racism and skin color-based discrimination in healthcare.

### **Marginalization and Poverty**

White narratives often portray Romani women with exaggerated, dehumanizing, and undignified images of their living conditions to reinforce the stereotype of the "poor gypsy." Although the socioeconomic situation of Roma is often low, white narratives present them as social benefit-dependent people, lacking ambition or personal agency to change their situation, which entirely ignores systemic racism and the challenges they face, unfairly placing the blame exclusively on them. Social structures, such as racism, sexism, and segregation, continually cause inequalities in the socioeconomic situation of Romani groups. The combination of mandatory expenditures, low access to education,

<sup>14</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*

<sup>15</sup> Strausz, L. (2014). Producing prejudice: The rhetoric of discourses in and around current films on Roma-Hungarian interethnic relations. *Romani Studies*, 24(1), 1-24.

<sup>16</sup> According to Edward Said, Orientalism describes how the West portrays Eastern societies through a lens of exoticism, stereotypes, and colonialist attitudes, justifying and maintaining power over them. Said, E. (1977). *Orientalism*.

<sup>17</sup> Romaversitas. Lehetne egy kicsit halkabban? [https://romaversitas.hu/lehetne\\_web.pdf?\\_t=1709648103](https://romaversitas.hu/lehetne_web.pdf?_t=1709648103)

unemployment, and biasedly constructed systems isolates them and forces them into poverty or at the edge of society. The most vulnerable groups exposed to poverty include long-term unemployed, part-time or informal market workers, single mothers and large families, people with disabilities or chronic illnesses, pensioners, Roma, and women. The intersection of these identities causes multiple exposures.<sup>18</sup>

### **Victimization and Powerlessness**

Discourses led by white narratives portray Romani women as helpless, powerless victims in need of being rescued or saved by external (white) forces. This narrative overlooks the potential for empowerment and self-advocacy, denying their abilities and agency over their lives. White narratives often incorrectly place excessive blame and shame on Romani people with low income for their poverty and attribute it to laziness, irresponsibility, and mismanagement of expenses. Poverty is not an individual decision or exclusively individual responsibility. People do not stay poor out of their own free will. White narratives often use victim-blaming and responsibility shifting that emerges in every field of life and ignore external factors, such as the lack of political will and interest (scapegoating Roma, exploiting their voting rights), discriminatory policies, excluding social services, and lack of support and care for their well-being.

Shaming and blaming people are tools designed to silence them, moralize the wealthy 'whites,' and ensure their place in the competition for resources. There is a distorted belief, known as meritocracy, that every wealthy person worked hard to be successful and that success is achievable for anyone willing to put in the same effort. However, hard work does not equal wealth. In capitalism, the low and working classes, including Roma, do all the poorly paid, terribly difficult hard work. In fact, just like people in poverty, wealthy people are born into their situation and mostly inherit their wealth. While the Roma, with low incomes, strive to achieve financial stability, the wealthy maintain control by retaining and increasing their resources.

White narratives can also generate very harmful and damaging success stories that portray Roma as heroes, exceptions who "broke out" of poverty, suggesting evidence that nothing is impossible, given that there are those who have managed to rise from deep poverty to the top. These narratives are one-sided, create competition, shame, and blame those who live in poverty. Moreover, it misses out on contextualizing external factors, such as biases, lack of access, social class, family, teachers, mentors or scholarship support, opportunities, and other circumstances. Due to a lack of consciousness and familiarity with media, these narratives are often supported by the personal stories of Roma, who are naturally proud of their accomplishments. However, the usage of their stories as 'breaking out' examples without mentioning the external societal factors exploits them and reinforces white narratives.

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<sup>18</sup> Mishra, M. (2022). Romani Communities and Transformative Change: A New Social Europe. (eds. Andrew Ryder, Marius Taba, and Nidhi Trehan, Policy Press, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.14267/CJSSP.2022.2.9>

## Knowledge Production

Although Romani women researchers are emerging, knowledge production, academic, scientific, medical, social, psychological, etc., research on Roma, unfortunately, is still predominantly conducted by 'white' people. These typically ethnographic, anthropological researches are leading to reproduced biased and damaging orientalist narratives, further aggravating the fundamentally poor social situation and perception of the Roma. Several issues remain unaddressed, with minimal or no research and knowledge available. For future reference, instead of adding to the nearly identical existing research, here are a few new research topic ideas related to Roma: political and systemic failures and corruption, racism and injustices, mental health, gynecological health problems, biases and maltreatment by health professionals, social workers, or teachers, racial profiling by police, unequal distribution of resources or white narratives, and systems upholding inequalities, and intersectional approach: socioeconomic and residential circumstances (urban-rural), challenges faced by LGBTQ+ Roma or Roma with disabilities, environmental injustices affecting Romani communities.

White narratives often accuse Roma of being overly sensitive and subjective in knowledge production and research, dismissing and invalidating our firsthand experiences. However, I hold a less popular opinion that entirely objective research does not exist due to inherent subjective biases in every researcher, aka every human being. Unfortunately, most research on Roma, particularly Romani women, is distorted by prejudices and racism and wrongly frames structural social issues Romani cultural and ethnic related, neglecting to consider external social factors, social classes, economic and social impacts, and their cause-effect relationship. This bias is influenced by white fragility, a tendency to shift responsibility, victim-blaming the vulnerable communities, privileges, a preference for comfort, and a reluctance for self-reflection.

Power dynamics and resources shape knowledge production; for instance, history is not only a record of past events but is actively constructed by those who hold power, often leading to the silencing of marginalized voices and perspectives. This process of knowledge production involves selecting which events are recorded, how they are interpreted, and which narratives are considered legitimate. Consequently, dominant groups can manipulate historical narratives to maintain power and perpetuate their ideologies. Therefore, critical thinking and examining historical sources and narratives are essential to ensure those voices that have been suppressed or ignored are also accurately included when it comes to understanding history and addressing the existence of white-washed history books.<sup>19</sup>

Accessing the opportunity to shape knowledge might be done in inclusive environments and spaces. However, in our capitalistic, individualistic, patriarchal society, accessing mainstream (white, privileged, elite, and very closed) supporting professional spaces,

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<sup>19</sup> Trouillot, M. R. (2015). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Beacon Press.



advancement opportunities, sponsorship, research, education, and even information is often a luxury to Romani women. Even if some seem approachable and inclusive, their openness stays within their comfort level, not engaging in self-reflection about their responsibility. Popular certifications, trending in the labor market and considered measures of expertise, success, and sometimes personal worth, are unaffordable even for middle-class Romani women with financial stability due to lacking a financial safety net. Fellowships and internships targeting Roma are also ineffective, as there are limited or no further opportunities for inclusive, stable employment after these programs end. White narratives undoubtedly have a powerful impact on societal perception, misrepresentation, and the existence of inclusive opportunities for Romani women. Challenging these structures and amplifying Romani voices to foster understanding and promote justice is essential regarding gaining access to mainstream and decision-making spaces, receiving support, accessing education and employment opportunities, and shaping policies, laws, and media representations.

### **Feminism and Romani Women**

While we hope women would support each other, sadly, with a few exceptions, this is not always the case. White narratives in feminism also focus on 'white' middle or upper-class, and indeed closed groups of women's experiences and interests, often neglecting the experiences, voices, and needs of Romani women, LBT women, women with disabilities, etc. This exclusion and marginalization reinforce white narratives and power structures, making it difficult for Romani women to get included in mainstream feminist movements.

Women, like other groups, are not a homogeneous, unified group. Women are diverse. Every woman has their own unique needs and problems influenced by their identities, culture, ethnic affiliation, sexual orientation, social and economic situation, family status (single, having a large family, single mother), age, mental and physical health, religion, place of residence, citizenship, and even linguistic differences. Although bell hooks and Audré Lorde published on the intersecting challenges of women, class, and race, intersectionality as a sociological concept is associated with Kimberlé Crenshaw, an African-American legal scholar, referring to the fact that multiple identities and traits can intertwine and simultaneously determine individuals' life situations, creating unique conditions for those affected.<sup>20</sup>

The fundamental goal of feminism is to ensure equal rights and opportunities for everyone, not only between men and women but also among women. WOC, Roma, women with disabilities, and LB and transgender women face specific challenges that a white middle-class woman does not at all, or only occasionally, experience in their lifetime. Although there is an overlap between their needs and problems, they are not precisely the same. Romani women can be more vulnerable at multiple levels of society because of

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<sup>20</sup> Carbado, D. W., Crenshaw, K. W., Mays, V. M., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). INTERSECTIONALITY: Mapping the Movements of a Theory1. *Du Bois review: social science research on race*, 10(2), 303-312.



their Roma origin and gender, and they simultaneously experience racism, sexism, prejudices, discrimination, and systemic violations of their human rights, which neither Roma men nor white women are exposed to.<sup>21</sup>

Although feminism has evolved from the early suffragettes to today's diverse and inclusive movement, intersectional feminism still requires improvements. Intersectional feminism offers the opportunity for alliance and cooperation to fight against racism, sexism, homophobia, and other isms jointly, considering gender differences and other social, ethnic, and economic factors. Romani feminist movements, groups, and activists are emerging, growing, and making our voices heard, amplifying the needs and issues of our communities through our lived experiences, connections, and struggles. Romani communities have been actively engaging in various initiatives to counteract false and harmful narratives, thereby fostering a more accurate and empowering representation of their identities.<sup>22</sup>

Feminist initiatives within the Roma communities, such as the [Romnja Feminist Library](#), the [Feminist Collective of Romani Gender Experts](#), and [the Giuvlipen Theatre Company](#), highlight Romani women's intersectional struggles and advocate for gender equality and social justice. Romani Studies as an academic field has grown significantly, with institutions like the [Romani Studies Program at Central European University](#) or the [Romani Studies at the University of Pécs](#). Many Roma-led organizations, such as the [Romaverstias Foundation](#), [the European Roma Rights Centre \(ERRC\)](#), and the [Roma Education Fund](#), play crucial roles in advocating for Roma rights, combating discrimination, and supporting education and economic opportunities. Even more national, local, and grassroots Romani initiatives and organizations are working across European countries actively to ensure Romani rights, representation, and participation.

## **Decolonizing Approach to Funds and Narratives**

Sometimes, white narratives are subtle. They come in the form of good intentions, compliments, or questions that suggest a bias toward Roma: "You speak in a nicely elaborated way!" "What did your parents wear for your graduation?" "Did you have books at your house while growing up?" Other times, white narratives include hate speech and incitement of hatred against Roma from politicians and public figures. The list of white narratives can go on with a variety of topics: lack of education, addiction to substances, practicing sexism and oppression due to traditions, lack of awareness and neglect of health, or criminality. Meanwhile, in reality, Roma are subjected to a lack of access to basic services, hindered human rights, and face hate speech, hate crimes, racial profiling, police brutality, and so on across Europe.

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<sup>21</sup> Schultz, D. L. (2012). Translating intersectionality theory into practice: A tale of Romani-Gadže feminist alliance. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38(1), 37-43.

<sup>22</sup> Kóczé, A., Zentai, V., Jovanović, J., & Vincze, E. (2018). Introduction: Romani feminist critique and gender politics. In *The Romani Women's Movement* (pp. 1-25). Routledge.

Damaging white narratives usually generalize Roma as a homogenous brown mass with the exact same needs, issues, circumstances, and social class, bounded by the same level of willingness to keep traditions. Many times, these narratives neglect to consider the bigger picture and unfairly place the responsibility and blame exclusively on Roma, ignoring systemic racism and oppression, economic and social impacts, and the lack of political will and interest. White narratives on individual, community, and institutional levels leave a dangerous effect on research, data, national and EU strategies on Roma, policy-making, the formulation of laws and regulations, and funding.

In civil society, there's a division between Roma-led and non-Roma-led pro-Roma organizations, with often no or little collaboration. This is not just due to a lack of capacity among NGO employees; the main issue is the constant competition for sustainability, funds, and budgets. CSOs often have to adapt to the objectives of the call made by the funders, based on their analysis, which limits the independence of Roma-led NGOs from working on their own agenda.

Historically, funding mechanisms have often reinforced colonial hierarchies and overlooked marginalized communities, including Romani women. This has not significantly changed; while there are a few larger, mainly international Roma organizations with more considerable funds and stability, the tendency shows that non-Roma pro-Roma organizations still have more resources and larger budgets. As a result, national and grassroots Roma organizations struggle to survive.

Why is that? Possible resources for civilians include corporate and private donations, sponsorships, grants, revenues from service activities, and tenders. The prevailing (white) narratives suggest that Romani civic organizations should generate resources and apply for grants more cleverly and enthusiastically while participating in numerous webinars and training on fundraising and creating resources. Despite these efforts, they continue to struggle to sustain themselves. Why? Because the issue does not lie with the national and local Romani organizations but with the grants, donors, supporters, philanthropists, larger institutions, or those with the power to distribute resources.

Some issues focusing only on grants:

- Access to information (such as grant opportunities) is a privilege many Roma organizations do not always have.
- Some grants require membership with a fee to be paid, and the cofounding requirement of a certain percentage of the grant also limits the eligibility of many Roma-led NGOs that do not have the necessary percentage
- EU and international funds often exclude national, small, grassroots Roma organizations by setting up specific criteria that make them ineligible to apply.
- If grants target Roma communities, they often have no or little operational or personal costs, implying that civilians' work should not be compensated. In Europe, grant-makers view NGO employees as holy creatures feeding on light and making a living out of handshakes, goodwill, and gratitude. However, no organization or

activity can function without the hard work of dedicated individuals. Projects do not run miraculously on their own; the efforts of committed people implement them.

- Most grants are project-based, and some only provide funding for brand-new projects, which is counterproductive. As a result, organizations may turn from their original mission and target to pursue trending topics like climate change, LGBTQ, and Roma simply because these are the popular focus areas with available funding. However, such activities may not be sustainable due to project-based support.
- Due to the continuous competition for money, larger organizations often oppress, exclude, or exploit smaller ones instead of supporting them and offering collaboration. While some grants require cooperation and partnerships with Romani organizations, these collaborations often result in little to no resource sharing. Romani organizations are typically only involved in the project's implementation phase to tick the indicators, numbers, checkmarks, or photos of our lovely, brown-skinned people.

This is why we need specific funds directed toward intersectionality and toward Romani women, as there is a significant lack.

- It is time to decolonize funding, shift power dynamics, and redistribute resources that center community needs and priorities instead of top-down approaches.
- It is time to include Romani women in the decision-making body of philanthropic foundations, on the board of grant-makers and donors
- It is time to invest in initiatives from Romani women, center their voices and experiences, and sponsor and support their leadership.
- It is time to create access to mainstream spaces for Romani women and meaningfully involve them in design, planning, implementation phases, and decision-making processes without tokenizing them.
- It is time for donors, grant-makers, and grant writers to allocate specific funds to Romani women and oblige the inclusion of Romani organizations and professionals in every grant targeting Roma
- It is definitely time to initiate and practice participatory grantmaking, including Romani women, and create grants together for their cause.

## **Participatory grantmaking**

Participatory grantmaking is a process in which decision-making power over the allocation of funds is shared with the community or stakeholders affected by the grants. Instead of traditional grantmaking, where a small group of funders, donors, or experts make decisions,

participatory grantmaking involves the intended beneficiaries in the decision-making process. Participatory grantmaking represents more democratic and inclusive approaches to resource allocation. This approach aims to empower communities to identify their own needs, priorities, and solutions and acknowledges that those closest to the issues often have the best understanding of how resources should be allocated to address them. Participatory grantmaking recognizes the expertise, perspectives, and needs of those closest to the issues being addressed. This approach can take various forms, such as community-driven grantmaking panels, participatory budgeting processes, or consensus-based decision-making models. By engaging those directly affected by the grants, participatory grantmaking ensures that resources are allocated more equitably and effectively to address community needs.<sup>23</sup>

Participatory grantmaking empowers communities by giving them a voice in deciding how resources should be allocated to address their needs. This fosters a sense of ownership and agency among community members. It also enhances accountability and transparency by involving community members in decision-making. Funders are held accountable to their communities as decisions are made openly and collaboratively. Like any other inclusive practice, participatory grantmaking takes time and is resource-intensive, requiring significant investments in facilitation, capacity building, and coordination to ensure meaningful participation.<sup>24</sup>

### **Self-Reflection and Power Distribution**

Looking at white narratives and conducts of behavior, they can be harmful due to their potential to be easily internalized. With that being said, constructive feedback is also essential for our Romani brothers and sisters working at international networks, institutions, and organizations with larger power and resources or being in leadership positions: there is space for us to improve our leadership, and instead of being gatekeepers, learn how to share and distribute power and funds more equitably, consciously including Romani women. To achieve this, we all need to practice self-reflection on our privileges, biases, and positions and be open to continuously learning about ourselves, systems of oppression, and associated notions and practices.

Decolonization means recognizing and challenging the prejudices of white narratives and power structures purposefully built to benefit the 'white.' It is essential to recognize, acknowledge, listen to, and amplify WOC, LBT, and Romani women's voices, narratives, and lived experiences, appreciate their perspectives, and apply anti-colonial and anti-racist strategies against white norms and prejudices. It is crucial to create initiatives for redistributing resources and power, involving Roma in mainstream spaces, consulting them, designing, leading, and implementing programs together.

Regardless of the terms "decolonizing," "nothing about us, without us," "building a bigger table," or other notions that have unfortunately become clichés, previous generations of

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<sup>23</sup>Hauger, T. D. (2023). Nothing about us without us: innovating grantmaking processes with participatory methodology. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 36(4), 631-651.

<sup>24</sup> Gibson, C. M. (2017). *Participatory Grantmaking: Has Its Time Come?* New York: Ford Foundation

Roma activists have presented this request to white people in power for at least six decades with little or no changes.

The harsh reality is that the average Romani woman, even middle-class ones with higher education, language knowledge, and some gained privileges, still often rely and depend on mainly white men and women with more power, influence, accessibility, and social networks. Despite experiencing unequal and unjust treatment, along with racial and gender bias, we, Romani women, are still the ones who find ourselves being overly careful with our words and opinions not to offend the dominant white group or shake the foundations they have built their entire lives around. We, the Romani women, are still expected to request inclusion and make the first steps towards it. We must carefully choose our battles, seeking cooperation by suppressing our generational traumas, lived experiences, and mental and emotional stability to peace, soothe and comfort white privileges, ignorance, and guilt, ensuring their mental and emotional well-being. Hence, we might be able to access mainstream spaces, academia, media, NGOs, government, policymaking and decision-making bodies, educational institutions, healthcare, legal systems, women's support groups, business incubation programs, etc. We pay a high price to be included, sometimes taking the token role to initiate effective and tangible changes and decolonize perspectives and practices, so that we might gain some privilege to access mainstream spaces, pieces of the unequally distributed wealth, power, and resources to change the starting point of the following Romani generations and communities.

Dear 'white' people, the decision is yours; you have the luxury of choosing which side of the story you want to see or be on: either bury your head in the sand or take a long, hard look in the mirror.

*This writing raises awareness and encourages readers to openly and vulnerably think about their biases, privileges, and power and start consciously and proactively challenging harmful narratives and unjust practices in their environment.*

#### Recommendation summary

- Decolonize funding, shift power dynamics, and redistribute resources that center community needs and priorities instead of top-down approaches. Include Romani women in the decision-making body of philanthropic foundations, on the board of grant-makers and donors. Invest in initiatives from Romani women, center their voices and experiences, and sponsor and support their leadership. Create access to mainstream spaces for Romani women and meaningfully involve them in design, planning, implementation phases, and decision-making processes without tokenizing them. Allocate specific funds to Romani women and oblige the inclusion of Romani organizations and professionals in every grant targeting Roma. Initiate and practice participatory grantmaking, including Romani women, and create grants together for their cause.

- Recognize and emphasize the intersectionality of ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other essential factors in narratives, practices, policies, legislations, programs, and initiatives targeting Roma. Actively seek out and amplify the voices and perspectives of Romani women in mainstream discourses, academia, media, and policy discussions. Ensure intersectional feminism that includes the voices and issues of Romani women, guaranteeing their specific challenges are addressed within broader feminist agendas.
- Encourage diverse and accurate media representation of Romani people, especially women. Encourage media outlets to counter stereotypes and emphasize Romani people's agency and achievements. Hire Romani journalists and seek and request expertise from Roma before publishing about them.
- Implement educational programs and awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes, biases, and misconceptions about Roma and women. Implement workshops, strategies, or educational programs in schools, healthcare professionals, educators, social workers, journalists, media workers, corporations, companies, and communities that promote understanding of social injustices and practical tools for equity and inclusion.
- Provide support and resources to grassroots organizations led by Romani people, particularly women, that focus on empowerment, advocacy, and community development. Involve Romani women in funding allocation decision-making processes, ensuring their priorities and needs are centered. Advocate for equitable distribution of funding and resources to Romani-led organizations supporting their sustainability.
- Support research initiatives that collect disaggregated data on Roma, women, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities, and other intersecting identities to inform evidence-based policies and interventions. Ensure that research methodologies respect Roma and prioritize community participation. Provide scholarships and grants specifically for Romani researchers and academics to conduct research that reflects their lived experiences and challenges dominant, white-centric narratives. Encourage universities to include studies in their curricula and promote interdisciplinary research on issues impacting Roma.
- Advocate for policies addressing systemic injustices, racism, sexism, and economic inequalities faced by Roma and women, including access to education, healthcare, employment, and housing, environmental justice. Ensure these policies are developed in consultation with Romani professionals and communities to meet their needs. Engage local, national, and EU policymakers to adopt inclusive policies that combat discrimination and promote the social inclusion of Romani women.
- Establish mechanisms for monitoring progress in addressing anti-Roma racism, homophobia, and gender discrimination. Hold institutions accountable for implementing inclusive policies and addressing systemic barriers Romani women face and for addressing racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination within their structures and operations.

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