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Erasing Boundaries: Researching the Emancipation Process of Roma Women within the Framework of the HEROINES Project*

Contemporary societies, both globally and locally, are becoming increasingly aware of the need for inclusiveness and equality, especially when it comes to those social groups that have historically been neglected or marginalized. Women's empowerment, in a broader context, is becoming one of the key

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mechanisms in the fight against discrimination and inequality. Its role is particularly significant in cases where women, in addition to gender-based, also face other forms of structural inequality – ethnic, social and economic. This is precisely the situation that characterizes the life contexts of Roma women, whose emancipation, despite the existing history of research, remains insufficiently known, especially in the context of creating deeper and more comprehensive insights into their struggles and achievements. This paper seeks to provide a new perspective on the process of emancipation of Roma women, mapping the paths of the empowerment through the analysis of the obstacles they face, but also the practices of resistance, solidarity and independent actions that build spaces of freedom and subjectivity. The authors do this based on the research conducted within the framework of the HEROINES project, supported by the Centre for the Promotion of Science, and implemented by the Institute of Ethnography of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in cooperation with the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade and the Roma Women's Centre "Bibija". By applying the participatory methodology of community mapping – relatively new in Serbian social sciences and humanities – Roma women gain an active role in shaping their own stories, thereby destabilizing the traditional, paternalistic epistemological position of researchers.

Key words: women's emancipation, Roma women, HEROINES project, community mapping

Брисање граница: истраживање процеса еманципације Ромкиња у оквиру пројекта ХЕРОИНЕ

Савремена друштва, како на глобалном, тако и на локалном нивоу, постају све свеснија потребе за инклузивношћу и равноправношћу, нарочито оних социјалних група које су историјски биле запостављене или маргинализоване. Еманципација жена, у ширем контексту, постаје један од кључних механизма у борби против дискриминације и неједнакости. Њена је улога посебно значајна у случајевима када се жене, поред родне, суочавају и са другим облицима структурне неједнакости – етничке, социјалне и/или економске. Управо такав положај карактерише животне оквири Ромкиња, чија се еманципација, и поред постојеће историје проучавања, и даље недовољно истражује, нарочито у контексту стварања дубљих и свеобухват-

нијих увида у њихове борбе и постигнућа. Овај рад настоји да пружи нов поглед на процес еманципације Ромкиња, мапирајући путеве њиховог оснаживања кроз анализу препрека са којима се суочавају, али и пракси отпора, солидарности и самосталног деловања које граде просторе слободе и субјективности. Аутори то чине на основу резултата истраживања спроведеног у оквиру пројекта ХЕРОИНЕ који, под покровитељством Центра за промоцију науке, реализује Етнографски институт САНУ у сарадњи са Филозофским факултетом УБ и Ромским женским центром „Бибија“. Примењујући партиципативну методологију *мапирања заједнице* – релативно нову у српским друштвеним и хуманистичким наукама – Ромкиње добијају активну улогу у обликовању властитих прича, чиме се дестабилизује традиционална, патерналистичка епистемолошка позиција истраживача.

Кључне речи: еманципација жена, Ромкиње, пројекат ХЕРОИНЕ, мапирање заједнице

METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION

The two year project “Heritage of Emancipation: Empowering of Roma Women through Networks of Solidarity” (HEROINES) was initiated in 2024. This project has been implemented in the Institute of Ethnography SASA,¹ in cooperation with the Faculty of Philosophy,² University of Belgrade and the Roma Women’s Centre *Bibija*,³ and supported by the Centre for the Promotion of Science (CPN). It has focused on the process of emancipation of Roma Women in Serbia, using the methodology of *community mapping* (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Rašić 2024), based on the bottom-up approach which recognizes the importance of voices from local communities for their development and advancement.⁴ This methodological standpoint has enabled Roma women to be actively engaged in all phases of the project implementation, from the project design and data collection, to the data’s final selection. The main idea is that the data collected in participatory research are used as a framework for understanding and interpreting the

¹ Academic team members from the coordinating institution are Dr Ivan Đorđević (project coordinator), Dr Lada Stevanović, Dr Bojana Bogdanović and Dr Miloš Rašić.

² Academic team members from the partner organization are Dr Marija Đorđević and Dr Milena Jokanović.

³ Team members of this partner institution are Slavica Vasić Mitrović, Svetlana Ilić and Svetlana Marinković.

⁴ <https://etno-institut.co.rs/en/events/heroines>

process of Roma women's emancipation in different communities in Serbia. A key starting point of the methodology of *community mapping* based on the bottom-up approach is researching and discovering of collective answers and positions, creation of collective standpoints, and recognizing collective consensus of the community itself (as much as it is possible), in order to incapacitate prevailing narrative to dominate (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Rašić 2024, 259). The planned results of the project in which the *community mapping* methodology has been applied are the Community Mapping Manual, the mobile exhibition dedicated to the emancipation of Roma women and the accompanying representative catalogue of the exhibition in two languages (Serbian and Romani), which collectively become a joint product that shows the strength and resilience of the Roma women's community in Serbia.⁵

THEORETICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONING

The theoretical foundation and justification of the participatory research – including the methodology applied in the HEROINES project – stem from the assumptions of anthropological, post-colonial and feminist theories, but also from efforts to improve the current approaches and the processes of empowering marginalized social groups through recognition of the groups' own potential which is in focus (in this case it is about Roma women) and opening up space for their creative strength and experience to become significant agents in the process of research design and implementation.

In the world of nations in which we live, the position of the Roma as an ethnic group characterised by their nomadic way of life throughout history, as well as the fact that they have never even had their own state, has always assumed being condemned to hardship, marginalization and poverty, with the attitude towards Roma women and men eternally filled with prejudices and scorn (Klaus-Michael 2018; Marushiakova & Popov 2021; Hancock 2002).⁶ In every state and society, Roma are seen as the Other, with Roma women being double Other – as members of an ethnic minority and as women. Although they were never colonized in the narrowest sense of

⁵ <https://etno-institut.co.rs/en/events/heroines>

⁶ The issue of Roma people nomadism is complex and not always treated the same during history. Namely, laws were introduced to limit and change the nomadic way of Roma people's life in Austro-Hungarian Empire, however without success. On the contrary, recent efforts of Roma people's integration and visions by Roma elites are in opposition to this, and assume abandoning such way of life. More on this see in Marushiakova & Popov 2021, 7, 44.

the word, Roma people have always been subordinated and living under oppression (Sardelić 2021; Sardelić 2013; Kozce & Raluca 2009). Therefore, the position of Roma might be considered in the theoretical framework set by postcolonial theories (which do not necessarily refer to the colonized, but to the marginalized), whose pioneer is Edward Said. In his book *Orientalism*, Said opens huge field of decolonization in all social strata. Starting from the position that there are no academic researches that are non-political, Said points to hegemonic structures that have developed from the political supremacy in colonial relations, which have poured over and permeated different cultural and life domains, providing Western knowledge and culture with the dominant status and *positional* superiority in numerous relations and domains (Said 2000, 7–8). It is not only that postcolonial theories try to recognize and expose the web of hidden power relations. They also find ways to challenge this power and enable the marginal to speak in their own name. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, Said started the research about constructing of the object through colonial discourse which “has, however blossomed into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for” (Spivak 1993, 56).

Precisely in the context of the mentioned theoretical assumptions, the participatory research that we have implemented in cooperation with Roma women, aims to offer a different perspective and help in destabilizing the epistemological position from which we start, through the perspective and inclusion of Roma women in the research process itself, enabling us to broaden the perspective outside the research framework while respecting the group being researched. Thus, the subject position of the interviewees who are simultaneously researcher-collaborators, sheds light on the processes that Roma women go through, enabling them, as well as their achievements and difficulties to be recognized, at the same time helping us as researchers to emancipate our own research starting points.

The participatory epistemology used in the research of Roma women is not completely new in Serbian Academia. Namely, the first, seminal project in which young Roma women interviewed older Roma Women was done in 1998–2001. The research was grounded on the biographical research method and collecting oral histories with the mentorship of Svenka Savić. The results have been published in the book *Romkinje (Roma Women)*, by Svenka Savić, Marija Aleksandrović, Stanka Dimitrov and Jelena Jovanović.⁷ As a crown of this work, in the year of 2016, after her

⁷ The book was published in Serbian (2001), English (2003) and Romani (2004) languages.

Roma associates and students had achieved amazing academic progress and success, Svenka Savić published the book titled *Kako je muški rod od device? Visokoobrazovana romska ženska elita u Vojvodini* (*What is a male form of virgin? Highly Educated Roma Women Elite in Vojvodina*) in which she reflected on all the research projects they had done together and the success of these Roma Women some twenty years after they had started the first abovementioned project. This work testifies to the devotedness of Svenka Savić, and all the advantages of collaborative work, where the readiness of all participants to learn from each other needs to be highlighted (Svenka Savić was giving her working journals to her students in order to hear their comments and opinion) (Savić 2016, 7–9).

Participatory epistemology used in ethnographic research joins those theoretical streams (of feminist and postcolonial theories) in an effort to overcome the boundaries and rigidness of the dominant academic discourse and its limitations that sometimes exist even when the aim is to understand and respect the Other. As Rosi Braidotti points out, although it is necessary to appreciate the demands of humanisms, such as the ideals of equality, justice, reason and secular tolerance, at the same time it is necessary to overcome the limitation that has stemmed from humanism, i.e. that when we think of *Human as a measure of all things*, we should not forget that, in fact, this human is white male, heterosexual, the speaker of one of standardized (dominant) languages, the citizen of one of the first class states and urbanized (Irigary 1985; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Braidotti 2013, 65). So, the human is not a woman, foreigner, migrant, or the colonized *Other*; he is certainly not a Roma woman. This problem of limitations of humanist ideals is unintentionally, but not so rarely, a part of efforts (of governmental and nongovernmental organizations or projects) to recognize and overcome injustice and marginality, to help and give a voice to the Other – minority groups, national minorities, emigrants – exactly because it always also contains the notion of white, dominant male. After all, he also dominates Western academia from which we originate.

This discriminating position is intrinsically related to a dualistic cognitive pattern, that always refer to binary pairs through properties that necessarily privilege (and de-privilege) one side of the binary pair: male/female, white/black, reason/feeling, spiritual/physical, etc. Roma woman, viewed from the point of view of dominant stereotypes, is defined by all the mentioned criteria positioned at the negative sides of binary pairs she is a woman who is not white, and, even when her beauty is mentioned (always with exoticising connotation), she is adorned with sensitivity and physicality, while reason and spirituality remain the privilege

of men, albeit not Roma. The mentioned binarism lies at the basis of the Western philosophical tradition, but also of the general worldview, and it is another problematic knot that Rosie Braidotti tries to untie with her theory. Namely, Braidotti recognizes relationship towards the Other, as less valuable, as to one who is a little “more mortal than others” (Braidotti 2013, 15) turning it into a Deleuzian affirmation of Otherness, and in the utmost sense, defining the postanthropos she will also indicate the possibility of the disappearance of borders and differences between binary oppositions, which creates a chance for emancipation and the disappearance of relations based on dominance and submission (Braidotti 2013, 66). The intention of this project is to “abduct” Roma woman from the multiply inferior position and challenge all the prevailing stereotypes which Roma girls and women face every day, regarded as beautiful and sensitive, yet not intelligent and active enough to be independent and engage with their own emancipation. Affirmation of Otherness (Braidotti 1994, 46-47) theorized in Rosi Braidotti’s concept of *nomadic subject*, which persistently opposes social conventions of thought and behaviour (Braidotti 1994, 5), receives its practical shape through the active engagement of Roma women who participate in all the roles that the research on mapping their own women’s community and processes of emancipation entail.

Thus, on the grounds of such theoretical premises and aware of the multiply marginalized position of Roma women, as representatives of the ethnic minority and as women – therefore a double Other – the project HEROINES was designed with the idea not only to give a voice to Roma women by listening to their experiences and attitudes, but also to involve them in all research stages. To speak in one’s own name, without a mediator is to follow the ideas of the aforementioned postcolonial theories. The research was designed, carried out, and the material finally analysed in constant dialogue of researchers with Roma women. In this sense, this participatory community research seeks to blur and erase the boundaries between academic research team and Roma women, through close collaboration, conversations and joint interpretation of the material, i.e. in the best way for the affirmation of Otherness.

In addition, we should not forget that anthropology is the first among the humanities that became aware of its own colonial discourse and the need to overcome and reject it. Namely, Clyde Kluckhohn published the book *Mirror for Man: The Relation of Anthropology to Modern Life* in 1949, in which he set a disciplinary question and demand to reconsider the beginnings of anthropology in which researchers, unconscious of own prejudices had observed other peoples, trapped in their own values, and

unaware of the fact that each culture had its own context and meanings. For over seven decades, anthropology has been re-examining itself and finding ways to overcome its own prejudices and limitations. Our epistemological attempt at emancipation starts from participatory community research and the active inclusion of Roma women in the process, in all project stages. Thus the emancipation referred to here, does not involve only Roma women, but also the researchers, and our efforts to emancipate our disciplinary limitations.

PROJECT PHASES AND IMPLEMENTATION

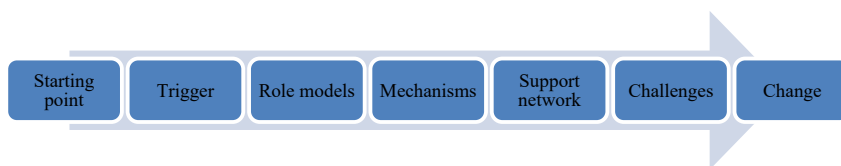
The HEROINES project has been implemented in several phases. The expert team, which consists of researchers from the Institute of Ethnography SASA and the Faculty of Philosophy of the UB, working in the first phase of the project – in consultation with the representatives of Roma women's associations (Roma Women's Centre *Bibija* from Belgrade, *Successful Women* from Kostolac and Citizens' Support *Ternipe* from Pirot) created *Manual for Mapping the Heritage of Women's Emancipation*. It consists of explanations of the key concepts recognized in the process of women's emancipation, as well as practical instructions for collecting and documenting the data necessary for creating a map of the legacy of women's emancipation in Roma communities.

In the second phase of the project, local Roma coordinators completed a two-day training for leading focus group discussions on the heritage of women's emancipation. This involved women who were recognized in their communities and who, in most cases, had experience of field work with the local population. The project associates have applied the acquired theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the field work immediately after completing the training. Over 80 Roma women from Kostolac, Belgrade and Pirot participated in this phase of the project. During the focus group discussions, the personal experiences of women of different ages (18–65) were documented in the form of audio recordings based on the work in focus groups, as well as individual interviews with four women who, in spite of the plan, could not join focus groups. In following project stages, the field material was expertly processed and analysed, while the results of the research will be presented to wider public in the form of a publication and exhibition planned for 2025. In accordance with the principles of participatory research, the material collected through group work was processed by all the members of the team, both researchers and Roma women, who searched for common answers and conclusions. Since the research addressed personal life experiences, the collective principle

might seem contradictory. And yet, although each fate and each experience was unique and unrepeatable, looking for what was common in individual confessions helped us detecting and recognizing different levels and factors of micro and macro social contexts, as well as their impact on the individuals.

In the following phase of the project, a monograph is going to be published and the research team is going to be additionally engaged in this. After that, an exhibition will follow, which would entail a presentation of the joint work by Roma women and researchers. Researchers here are going to appear as mediators who will help the voice and perspective of Roma women reach wider audience. Roma women should be heard and seen, while the heroines recognized by Roma women appear as *guiding stars* of their own emancipation.

On the grounds of the existing theoretical frameworks, as well as the legal regulations of the Republic of Serbia, *Manual for Mapping the Heritage of Women's Emancipation* (hereinafter: MMHWE) explained emancipation as “the process of liberation from all kinds of dependence, subjugation and oppression, with the aim of obtaining complete independence, self-reliance and leading life independent from the other” (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Jokanović 2025, 9). The key concept in explaining women's emancipation is the equality of women in relation to men, i.e. making equal their social, economic, legal and any other status and rights. In order to emphasize the fact that emancipation is not a given in itself, or something with which a human being is born, but a process that has dynamics largely determined by other factors (social, historical, individual, etc.), the MMHWE presents it as a path on which the following stages are crucial: the starting point – trigger – role models – mechanisms – support network – challenges – change:



Starting point is defined as “the social / family / personal context in which one wants to make a change” (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Jokanović 2025, 11). The starting points can be very diverse in nature, and determined by a number of external (socio-historical) and internal (individual) factors. Very often, the starting point is the multiply marginal position of women in the family, wider social community and society as a whole,

which is determined by numerous factors such as traditional patterns of behaviour, existing distribution of gender roles, strict patriarchal norms, a male-oriented labour market, numerous prejudices of the dominant population, or limiting enforcement of legal regulations (for example, in cases of divorce, domestic violence, etc.). All these factors are the reason why Roma women might feel personally (in)secure, which can be accompanied by lack of self-confidence, regarding one's own skills, knowledge and (the right to have) ambition. There are, of course, also other starting points grounded in macro and micro social environments in which the state of inferiority of women is not given; on the contrary – sometimes young women grow up in families and communities that have the emotional, organizational and financial capacity to make the path of their emancipation faster and easier. The character of the *starting point* largely determines the further course and dynamics of the process of women's emancipation, as it is explained in the *MMHWE* (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Jokanović 2025, 11). Stepping out of the usual / prescribed gender roles might be provoked by different *triggers*. The causes that lead to gaining self-awareness and taking concrete steps that lead to change can be both positive and negative: "Sometimes it is domestic violence that a woman no longer wants to endure, sometimes it is the ambition to achieve success in life, sometimes it is the desire to change the lifestyle / place of residence / immediate environment, and sometimes it is the need to prove oneself both to themselves and to others" (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Jokanović 2025, 12). The *trigger* might also be some positive experience, like living in a foreign country. The initiation of change is often accompanied by feelings of fear and insecurity, wherefore *role models* play very important role in the process of emancipation. These are individuals or groups of people who inspire others by their own example, showing that the change is possible. They can be public figures, or people from one's own community found among family or friends. Some of the qualities that role models should have are: persistence, courage, responsibility, self-control, self-confidence, etc. (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Jokanović 2025, 13). The *mechanisms* by which change is achieved are numerous, diverse and often interconnected. They might be obtained through education, employment, solving and controlling health problems, networking with members of the wider social community, moving from a place that is not physically and emotionally safe, such as leaving a violent partnership, etc. Choosing the manner in which to achieve change largely depends on possibilities of the moment, but also on the ultimate goal, the change for which one strives. In overcoming obstacles, there is *support network* that provides

encouragement and instigation for changing individual, family and social status. Crucial might be individuals, but also local organizations or associations, as well as state institutions. Their role is to inform, provide support, and (actively) participate in emancipatory practices (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Jokačević 2025, 14–15). Due to the existence of a long history of discrimination and exclusion, Roma women face numerous *challenges* on their way to emancipation. Obstacles that can hinder and slow down progress are found on three levels – *social* (discrimination on the basis of gender, religion and nationality, unfavourably gender-profiled labour market for women, disrespect, etc.), *family* (failure to provide assistance with childcare, housework, numerous prejudices about what a woman should or should not do...) and *individual* (insecurity, feeling of inferiority, lack of self-confidence, etc.).

Further in the text, we are going to present the results of the research on the emancipation of Roma women in Serbia, which was carried out as part of the project HEROINES, which in terms of methodology, scope, and planned means of dissemination of the results, has represented a pioneering work, at least when it comes to projects carried out in the Republic of Serbia, both within different humanist and social disciplines, and within the framework of other institutions / organizations outside the academic field.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The first phase of mapping the legacy of Roma women emancipation has been carried out through the focus group work organized in three cities – Kostolac, Belgrade and Pirot. The facilitators of the focus group discussions were Romani women from the association *Successful Women* from Kostolac, *The Roma Women's Centre Bibija* from Belgrade and the civil association *Ternipe* from Pirot. In the previous phase of the project, they took part in the training for mapping the heritage of women's emancipation. These trainings were led by members of the research team (Marija Đorđević, Bojana Bogdanović and Milena Jokačević) based on the *Women's Emancipation Heritage Research Guide*, which is an integral part of the MMHWE they created (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Jokačević 2025). There are five basic questions especially emphasized in this Manual – *to whom, when, why, how and where* Roma women turn for support, resources, achievement and celebration of their breakthroughs from imposed social and family boundaries. Over 80 Roma women of different age (18–65) participated in this phase of the project, sharing their life experiences that are now documented in the form of audio recordings. This was operated through

focus groups where participants were divided according to their age in the following way: a) 18–25 years; b) 25–35 years; c) 35–45 years old and g) 45+ years old), while individual interviews were done with six informants in Kostolac. The quality and quantity of the field material obtained enables approaching and analysing it in several ways, revealing the perspectives gained on different levels. In this paper, we present the results of the research following the presented road map, with special reference to each of its key stages, singled out in the *MMLWE* as essential for the process of women's emancipation itself. In accordance with the principles of participatory research, general conclusions are presented for each of them, followed by an illustrative example of the answers received from the informants.

The results of the research on Roma women emancipation within the *HEROINES* project have produced an *ideal type of emancipated woman* – she is, first and foremost, *independent* in making all life decisions (when to get married, how many children to have, what to do in life, how to manage her own money, how to organize her free time, etc.); she is also *self-aware*, as she is familiar with her rights and obligations, and behaves accordingly; she is *brave*, as she steps out of traditional roles and norms, ready to take risks and endure obstacles and failures; *she has strong personality* so she does not pay attention to the comments of her surroundings, and she lives her life as she wants; she is also *an educated woman* who continuously improves herself in the field for which she is formally educated; she is *employed* and earns her own income, which provides her with financial independence and “normal” and “decent” standard of living; she is *a modern woman* who always finds time for herself, has a distinctive style of dressing, and takes care of her health; she has a skill to balance her work and family obligations, being *a caring mother* for whom her children are always a priority, but also a wife who has *established a relationship full of respect*, love, and mutual support with her life partner; finally, she is a woman who is recognized within the broader community, whose opinion is respected by both immediate family members and colleagues, friends, relatives, and neighbours; in other words, she is a person “with whom everyone would gladly socialize.” However, informants are aware of the fact that this prototype implies idealization. In reality experiences are different, individually specific, and each mentioned achievement symbolizes progress towards a society in which Roma women have equal rights and opportunities as everyone else.

Almost all participants of the focus groups agree that the path to their emancipation bears *a double burden*, as they are exposed to double

discrimination – both in terms of gender and ethnicity. As women and members of the Roma community, Roma women are exposed to obstacles arising from both sources of marginalization, placing them in a particularly vulnerable position. Therefore, their emancipation in most cases involves a struggle for equality, safety, and access to education, health-care, employment, and other basic rights. According to the experience of Roma women, especially difficult to deal with is the conflict between traditional expectations of the Roma community, and the women's desire for emancipation and integration into broader society. This conflict often leads to isolation within the community itself, especially if women choose education, a career, or postpone marriage, which is particularly contrary to traditional values.⁸ Fates and possibilities of Roma women are shaped by various factors – family circumstances, social conditions, level of education, as well as the strength of personal will. Although there are general challenges and common obstacles they face, each woman has her own way of approaching and overcoming them. In other words, each of the recorded life paths of Roma women who participated in the research is a separate story which carries a unique course and weight. On this occasion, following the roadmap of emancipation presented on the previous pages, we will try to summarize these women's statements and provide one of the possible paths to the emancipation of Roma women in Serbia.

The starting point, or initial position from which Roma women embark on the path of emancipation, has been diverse in the cases of our interviewees – it varied from extremely negative to relatively positive. Namely, in a large number of cases, particularly noticeable in the older generation of interviewees (45+ years), childhood and maidenhood were marked by poverty (in some cases extreme), frequent changes of residence, life in a multi-generational family following traditional behavioural models (the oldest male is the head of the household), leaving school, etc. In such circumstances, women were denied the right to decide on their own life choices and felt inferior to male and older members of their primary family. This has been the most often evident in the situations where girls would be reaching the marrying age – they had a completely passive role in choosing the marriage partner, with other family members (most often brothers or parents) making the decision on their behalf. Without the right to decide, women are left to their fate.

⁸ More on marriages among Roma people, especially focusing on child marriages see in Đorđević 2021.

I am illiterate, I only completed two grades of school. Then I went to my sister and looked after her children. My brothers were in Belgrade and then they took me. My father died, we didn't have a house or anything. We all lived in other people's houses. It was very difficult. I got married at the age of 16. My brothers decided about my marriage. I didn't love him. I hated him as soon as I saw him. I was sitting for a year. I was not even pregnant. And then my brothers came to take me to some visit. Then he took me and said: "Come and look at the house one more time, you won't stay here anymore". That's how it was, I stayed with my brother. Then this old man of mine came. He was many years older. He was 30, 40 years old. He had already had a first wife and two children. The younger brother wanted to give me, the older one didn't want. In the end I left, what could I do. (Focus Group, Kostolac)

On the other hand, the starting point for most of our interviewees of younger generation is not related to their marginal status in society. Rather, it is a result of their (somewhat) better economic status and social context in which they have grown up and lived, as well as of the implementation of certain legal regulations (such as mandatory primary education), and the intense social actions aimed at better acceptance of Roma population by the wider community. As it has turned out, unlike the wider social context, patriarchal patterns that refer to dominant position of men are extremely resilient to change, especially in the family context.

I was born here, in Kostolac. We were three children. My father died when I was four. I don't remember him anymore. I just watch photos and see how we used to play with him, play the music with him. My mother left us after his death. We were raised by our grandmother, uncle and his wife, and paternal aunts. It was hard for us growing up without parents. But we are very grateful that we had the uncle and aunt, who raised and educated us, who supported us, who told us stories, who advised us, and that we finished school. Now, we are going to get our driving licence. I've finished for the technician of energetics, the fourth level of the technical school "Nikola Tesla". I didn't like it, but my uncle didn't want me to change to another school profile. He was afraid how people would treat me. We didn't have problems in school. When I finished primary school, I received a prize from my class teacher and school principal, to go to Požarevac and buy myself a dress. But I could barely find something because I had put on weight. (Focus Group, Kostolac)

The primary and the most frequently mentioned *trigger* for change are difficult financial and existential circumstances in which our interviewees had lived, before they decided to find a job and improve their economic status. This is very vividly described by one of our informants who had had to find a job after her husband died:

Since the age of seven, I have lived in Old Kostolac, in Kolonija, where the poorest people live, in misery. It was hard time. We didn't go to school, we were more in the fields. We managed like any poor person – if you have one thing, then you don't have something else, if you have another thing, you don't have the third, and so on. Then the first child was born, then the second, then the third. My husband was a good man, we got along really well. Then he died and left me alone with three children. I was the first woman in Kostolac who got a job at the Utility Company. From that salary, I continued to live and educate children... (Focus Group, Kostolac)

One of the causes that often trigger the change is domestic violence. A large number of interviewees emphasized the fact that violent partner and disrupted family relationships had been the reason for their decision to leave an environment which was not physically and emotionally safe:

There were four of us at home – mom, dad, brother and me. For as long as I could remember, it was fierce at home. [...] Mom didn't have any income. Dad wouldn't settle down, he would go out, do whatever he wanted, no one knew where he was. It was really difficult. Mom struggled to raise us. Then, when we bought a house, we thought that everything would be ok, but it wasn't. That is why I decided to get married, continue going to school, start to engage in activism, get my driver's license, and start working. (Focus Group, Kostolac)

The third, most often mentioned *trigger* has been the wish to step out of the frames of traditional gender roles, not only because of the awareness of one's own difficult and unfavourable position, but also because of anti-models, i.e. the examples of other women from the family (most often a mother) and the wish and decision not to accept the kind of life these women lead. The aforementioned reason for the change has often been accentuated by younger women:

As I grew up, I noticed that my mother was always in bad condition. She was getting skinnier and skinner. She was suffering and unhappy.

I was watching how she lived a life of a servant, and not of a wife and a mother. When I was 17, 18 years old I had enough of watching my mother suffering, going to work, coming home and working, cleaning, washing...No matter how much I helped her, she was the one who was holding the whole house on her shoulders [...] And I left home [...]. (Focus Group, Belgrade)

On the contrary, there have been positive, inspiring women, *role models*, who show with their example what a woman might achieve in life. They are found among famous public women (actresses, women singers), women from the local communities (most often Roma women who overcome obstacles through work and activism, fighting double marginalization and making paths for new generations of Roma women), or women from the closest surroundings (friends, relatives). Freedom in choosing, independence (above all economic), decisiveness, persistence and courage are characteristics of the mentioned role models.

My role model is Nataša Bekvalac. To marry as many times as I wish, to live my own life and not to care what other people think. (Focus Group Belgrade)

I watch this woman, V. for whom I worked. She is fantastic. Not because she is rich, more than rich so she might buy the whole Belgrade, but because she has her own personality. She is cheerful and spiritual. The family gets along well. She keeps them all together. (Focus Group Belgrade)

The ways (mechanisms) for starting the change are various and depend a lot on the trigger, i.e. the reason that initiates the change. Concerning the fact that the most often mentioned reasons for change have included difficult financial situation, domestic violence and a wish to step out of traditional gender roles, the mechanisms recognized by the interviewees as the key factors of emancipation, that lead to the change and acquiring new status in the family and community, include getting a job, leaving violent partner or other unsafe family contacts, and becoming educated. According to the participants, education is the most efficient mechanism of emancipation because it leads directly to better positioning in the labour market, increases self-confidence and self-esteem, promotes independence, etc. Therefore, even today, a large number of members of the Roma community (especially men) have a negative attitude towards

the education of girls and women, perceiving school as an extremely “dangerous place” for them. In this context, a very important role is played by the legal regulations according to which primary school is compulsory. Since this regulation is quite old, even more important are representatives of the Centre for Social Work who check if girls really go to school and might have influence on this law being respected:

Centre for Social Work visited us, telling my father that he has to enrol us in school or they will put us in a Children's Home. I was 11 when I enrolled school. And father always came to pick me up and went to school with me. And he would let me stay alone in the street and beg. (Focus Group, Belgrade)

Even mothers sometimes have ambivalent attitudes towards girls' education (especially extracurricular), fearing that this might lead to them meeting older guys and men. Thus, sometimes out of fear of early marriage, or afraid that the girls might fall into a submissive relationship, even mothers wish to deny daughters the right to go to school, although exactly this is crucial for female emancipation. One of the mothers talked about this in a focus group:

If my child goes to evening school, I would lose her in a few months, maybe even less. Because people who come to evening school are drunk, older, unmarried, young, they come from all over. (Focus Group, Belgrade)

For a large number of interviewees, education appears to be a secondary, but very valuable mechanism of emancipation – for example, after leaving an abusive partner, an interviewee was encouraged to and continued her education, which resulted in her employment and independent life in a new living space. Therefore, not only formal, but also informal education (such as courses for hairdressers, cosmetologists, etc.) are recognized as a necessary mechanism to fully implement the emancipation processes, and some of the interviewees have decided to start education, or continue pursuing improvement in the fields in which they had been educated earlier, even in their middle age.

The existence of a support system, namely family, friendship, institutional, and social networks that women can rely on in situations of risk, uncertainty, and insecurity is an extremely important precondition for their emancipation. Trust is the key word that characterizes the relation-

ship between a woman and her *support network*. The interviewees state that the primary moral support have been provided by individuals whom they trust, but legal and financial assistance is also significant, especially in situations that involve relocating a woman from a violent partner and unsafe family environment. In most cases, the support network consist of female relatives (mother, grandmother, aunt), as well as representatives of local Roma associations, and individuals employed in institutions providing social support (*Nedeljnik* 2020). The interviewees were almost unanimous in agreeing that parental support was crucial.

I was thinking that if I continued with him, I would end up in a mental institution or, God forbid, dead. That my daughters will get married at 13 or 14 to escape such a life, and my sons will be street kids. First, I wanted to help myself, then them. Then I filed all divorce papers . [...] The two younger ones were in preschool, and one teacher who still works there helped me a lot. I needed to talk to someone, to get some advice. She encouraged me and told me to go to the Centre for Social Work. There, I also talked to those women, and they really helped me with the documentation. I had great support from the Social Work Centre in Zemun. (Focus Group, Belgrade)

Some of the interviewees pointed out that on the path to emancipation (especially in its initial phase) they did not have support, meaning that the support from both family members and members of the immediate and broader community was completely absent. They state that it is extremely difficult to make a change when the closest environment, especially parents, “do not look forward, but pull back.” In such situations, they found support within themselves, putting in extra effort (and courage) to implement their own ideas or ambitions.

I enrolled myself in school. My mother didn't want to go with me to enrol me. I watched what my friend was doing and I did everything after her, I enrolled myself. (Focus Group, Belgrade)

On their way to emancipation, Roma women face numerous challenges. These challenges can be external and internal. The first stems from family, social, economic, and political structures, which often hinder their struggle for equality and empowerment. These challenges are linked to discrimination, poverty, stereotypes, and inadequate access to key resources. The lack of support and condemnation from their surroundings

have been essential problems encountered by the interviewees on the path to changing their status. The lack of support from parents and close family members is explained (and in some cases justified) by the concerns for their daughters, or fear that something bad might happen to them. This lack of support is manifested in various ways – in some cases, as a prohibition of education, in others, as a refusal to help with childcare, or even a failure to react to violence (of any kind). Most interviewees, particularly those of older age, have encountered various prejudices throughout their lives, dominantly based on ethnicity and gender. As the interviewees state, in interactions with the majority population, negative attitudes towards Roma minority (in some cases, extreme) are evident, stemming from the widespread prejudices that Roma are dirty, lazy, and want to steal. Often, due to their ethnicity, they were rejected for jobs, socializing, and any kind of contact. Educated Roma women have a somewhat better experience, as members of other groups view them as good examples.

They would rather sit and talk with me than with a mom who finished just 4 grades of elementary school. They will accept me into their social circle, have coffee with me, they won't humiliate me, and my child will be able to play with theirs because they know I work at school. And the other one is illiterate. Although her children are clean, neat and she is smart, they don't choose to be with her. But they will choose me first. (Focus Group, Belgrade)

Internal challenges of emancipation are related to obstacles from communities or individuals, often deeply rooted in traditional norms, values, and beliefs. These challenges might be equally limiting as external factors (if not more), because they affect internal motivation, perception of possibilities, and readiness to change. Within their own communities, Roma women face another type of prejudices – one that finds its fictitious basis in traditional behavioural matrixes, and accordingly, in the inferred inferior position of women in the micro and macro social community:

My older daughter graduated from college. She dated her boyfriend for 7, 8 years. But these people didn't want an educated daughter-in-law. They wanted a daughter-in-law who would sit in the house and clean. My daughter broke up with him after 8 years. (Focus Group, Belgrade)

Many of the interviewees are aware of the fact that numerous challenges, or obstacles, also exist on individual level. Individual feelings of

powerlessness are undoubtedly influenced by obstacles, discrimination, violence, and prejudices dominant in various social contexts, not making the emancipation process any easier. What can facilitate it, however, is the awareness of these pervasive social obstacles, which are sometimes even perceived as well-intentioned (justification of concerned parents). As many interviewees state, the beginning of the emancipation journey is often accompanied by feelings of insecurity and worry, and questions such as: "What if I fail?", "Do I have the strength?", "What if I don't make the right decision?" etc. As some of them state, the hardest thing is to take the first step, which in most cases actually begins with figuring out that life change is necessary. And possible.

CONCLUSION

The project *HEROINES*, dedicated to the emancipation of Roma women, is being conceived and implemented as a participatory community research. Therefore, Roma women have a dual role in it. They appear as researchers and interviewees. Thus the paper, as well as the project, based on the intersection of theory, activism and field research, reveal that blurring the boundaries between those domains, and all the participants of the project enables dialogue, fresh perspectives and empowering of all the project participants. The angle and the opinion of each individual, is important and should be appreciated if we want to overcome the hegemony subtly prevailing in the postcolonial and neo-colonial world, including the academia.

Exploring and researching their own emancipation, Roma women have made this project exceptional and multidimensional in improving the understanding of the process, and focusing not only on the obstacles of the emancipation of Roma women (in various social micro and macro domains), but also enabling (through teamwork) empowerment of the Roma women who have participated in the project. Such teamwork enables development of self-awareness and self-confidence through the process of thinking and reflecting on common critical points, recalling one's own achievements, and acknowledging various difficulties that had to be overcome, which has not made this path easy. From the research perspective, participating in the project dealing with the process of emancipation of Roma women has facilitated insights into every individual success of emancipation (of the interviewees), as well as into the enormous steps and efforts that needed to be made in overcoming the difficulties.

This research reveals that the model of participatory community research which we have taken from the fields of trade and market, or urban development (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Rašić 2024, 258–259), also holds

an enormous potential when it comes to humanist research, enabling the empowerment of communities and individuals. Searching for polyphonic answers, community mapping enables the members of a community to truly reflect on and create its future (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Rašić 2024, 259), which resonates with the notion of contemporary communities that are, and tend to be sums of individuals.

Although the research in focus groups usually involves searching for common answers and reaching group consensus (Đorđević, Bogdanović & Rašić 2024, 259), in this particular case where individual experiences and delicate, intimate problems have been explored, the answers have inevitably been multidimensional, always personal and involving intimate confessions. The research results have shown that many Roma women of today are an example of how one can rise above unfavourable conditions through hard work and support. They are heroines who symbolize strength, perseverance, and the ability to overcome numerous obstacles, both external and internal, in their pursuit of emancipation, equality, and better life. Their experiences are often inspiring examples of the struggle for personal freedom and dignity, but also for the rights of their community and the society as a whole. Their stories become beacons of hope for those who are still seeking their own path. These diverse stories remind us that, when we look for different experiences and narratives, we always have to start from individuals, even when we think of a wider community. Namely, changes often happen step by step, person by person. By accepting the uniqueness of each story and each experience, we open the door to understanding and genuine support. Every story is worth listening to and respecting. With this project, we have strived to make the achievement of emancipation of Roma women visible, and this paper has been a part of the aforementioned research process.

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