

IMPROVING THE ACCESS TO JUSTICE OF ROMA WOMEN

Collection of good practices
from Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Romania

JUSTROM

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Council of Europe
February 2022

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“With JUSTROM, I feel a moral duty to fight, side by side, with all those who still haven’t made it... I always say: I am a voice, a voice for others. I am a voice for all those who turn to JUSTROM, and I want to continue to fight for them and with them. Because it is unimaginable the beauty of seeing the joy in the eyes of those who manage to see their fundamental rights affirmed and protected”.

Facilitator in Naples, Italy

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	7
PRESENTATION OF THE JUSTROM3 PROGRAMME	8
COVID-19 AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION	10
ASSISTING ROMA NAVIGATE THE VOLATILE AND CONFUSING PUBLIC INFORMATION LANDSCAPE	11
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE	12
LEGAL EMPOWERMENT OF ROMA WOMEN	15
THE PERSONS WITHOUT IDs AND THEIR “NON-EXISTENT CHILDREN”: A FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE OF HUMAN RIGHTS	17
EMPOWERING ROMA WOMEN LEADERS	21
A GOOD PRACTICE FOR INCREASING THE REPORTING ON RACIST VIOLENCE	25
CO-OPERATION AND PARTNERSHIPS	27
CONCLUSIONS	29

INTRODUCTION

This compilation report presents the work conducted by the European Union and Council of Europe Joint Programme “Roma Women’s Access to Justice” (JUSTROM3) teams in: Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Romania, with a focus on the good practices identified during the Programme for improving the access of Roma women to justice. It is based on the national reports produced by the JUSTROM teams. The report identifies good practices which are illustrated as much as possible with examples from work on the ground.

— The structure of the report is the following: a brief presentation of the Programme; the impact of the pandemic on the programme; specific issues, such as gender-based violence; the legal empowerment of Roma women, with a focus on stateless Roma and Roma without IDs; the empowerment of Roma women leaders through mentoring sessions and outreach activities; increased synergies and partnerships, highlighting good practices, such as the increase of reporting on racist violence thanks to co-operation with a specialized network.

PRESENTATION OF THE JUSTROM3 PROGRAMME

The third phase of JUSTROM Programme was implemented between 2019-2022. JUSTROM3¹, which focused on Roma women's access to justice in four European Union countries: Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Romania. JUSTROM3 was a natural development of the two previous phases and aimed to achieve sustainable results, in particular by empowering Roma women to replicate and multiply the work conducted in the previous phases in their communities.

■ The Programme was organised around three pillars:

- ▶ (1) empowerment of Roma women;
- ▶ (2) enhancement of professional resources (especially legal professionals, law enforcement, NGOs/human rights advocates, etc.);
- ▶ (3) increasing synergies and partnerships.

■ As of June 2021,² the Programme implemented 479 events³, with a total of 4 772 participants (out of which 2 981 were Roma participants).

■ In Romania, the JUSTROM3 team assisted more than 350 Roma women and their families by providing information on various legal topics in the following areas: Ferentari, Salaj, Zabrautului and Rahova areas, Bucharest District 1 and District 5, Iasi: Iasi County, Dacia, Nicolina, Alexandru Cel Bun, Frumoasa, CUG neighborhoods, Raducaneni, Paușești, Lungani, Dagata, Zece Prajini village, Tarnita village, Podu Iloaiei, Dolhesti, Pietriș. In Bulgaria, the JUSTROM3 Programme worked in Plovdiv and Veliko Tarnovo. In Italy, JUSTROM3 teams worked in Naples and Rome, whilst in Greece they worked in the Attica region (including Athens), Thessaloniki and Xanthi. 37 long-term consultants were contracted in the four countries, either as national coordinators, legal consultants or facilitators.

■ Whilst in Romania facilitators undertook weekly visits in the communities, in Italy, the lead facilitator in Rome never stopped visiting the communities even in lockdown, thanks to a special authorisation, while the Naples facilitators moved from one family to another, as much as possible, since they had been already living in the Scampia⁴ settlement for years. In Greece, legal consultants working in Thessaloniki gave on-site legal consultations twice a week before COVID-19, and then transferred their activities online. In fact, during lockdowns, all JUSTROM3 teams adapted and switched to communications via phone, online, and on platforms such as Viber and Whatsapp. In Bulgaria, the teams gave legal consultations and information via the phone.

■ **Versatility** and **resilience** are two key elements that characterise the work conducted by the JUSTROM3 teams in the context of the restriction measures of COVID-19: from methods of communication to availability, strong presence in the communities and dissemination of relevant information, especially on legal and administrative access – especially in the context where, as seen below, many public services had transferred partially, and at times, totally to an online mode of work. The challenge for the JUSTROM3 teams was enormous but, at the same time, it also proved to be a great opportunity for stronger community mobilisation, greater synergy between leaders-teams-stakeholders-communities, increased level of trust, communication and understanding.

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1. JUSTROM phases one (2017-2018) and two (2018-2019)
 2. Roma Women's Access to Justice (JUSTROM) Facts and Figures. June 2021. <https://rm.coe.int/roma-women-s-access-to-justice-justrom-/1680a3d8ca> (accessed on 12/02/2022).
 3. 110 awareness-raising gatherings; 14 info days; 104 mentoring sessions; 223 outreach activities; 37 Roma women leaders included in the mentoring programme. The programme also included: 15 Trainings of Trainers (on issues such as: Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence; Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, European Court of Human Rights standards on Roma and women, Gender Equality and Statelessness); 19 trainings for professionals (656 participants): lawyers; staff of municipalities; social workers; NGO staff; law enforcement officials; health mediators.
 4. Scampia is a neighbourhood in the far north of Naples.

■ As one consultant in Greece acknowledged⁵, thanks to the Programme “consultants (...) were able to view the distribution of justice, not merely as a legal phenomenon, but also as a political, social, economic, multi-level phenomenon. They came to realise the multiplier effects of awareness and of empowerment in contrast with the patriarchal client –attorney relationship.” At the same time, it had the effect of changing the perspective of Roma women onto the justice system, not to see it anymore as “alien, punitive and ineffective” but to be “empowered citizens (...) aware of their rights and understand(ing) the avenues for seeking redress”⁶.

■ The methods used by the JUSTROM3 teams consisted of training sessions, mentoring sessions, awareness-raising events, stakeholder meetings and counselling, but there were also innovative methods, such as storytelling (as used by the JUSTROM team in Bulgaria).

■ Storytelling proved to be particularly important, as it is “user-friendly language”⁷ for both the storyteller and “the audience”, as no special training or literacy was required for its communication. The important thing was not to agree or disagree on the experiences that women shared, but that they were considered worthy of being shared. This prevalent element of **accessibility** in JUSTROM3 Programme work guaranteed not only that women had the means that helped them tell their stories, but also that the supporting listeners had the means to understand these stories. “Ultimately, the more women’s stories were told and shared, the more women were empowered to build and take control of their own narrative.”

■ The storytelling method, and especially the meetings conducted offline, were very important for community building, in the context where the pandemic had severely diminished the social life and community gatherings and there were fewer opportunities at the local level for women to get together. In this context, the JUSTROM3 Programme had the much-needed effect of **community building**, a space for women to be together and act together for the betterment of their communities.

■ The main issues covered by the JUSTROM3 Programme were: COVID-19 prevention; community organising; access to justice with a focus on legal aid and statelessness, access to social services; digitalisation; gender-based violence, and available redress mechanisms to counter discrimination.

5. Georgios Tsiakalos.

6. Idem.

7. All quotes in relation to storytelling are extracted from the Bulgarian report for the JUSTROM Programme, 2021.

COVID-19 AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

The initial focus on empowering Roma women was strongly challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, in fact, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the JUSTROM3 teams needed to re-shape some of their activities (postpone meetings, move them online) and also to respond to new needs and new situations.

■ In Bulgaria, the JUSTROM team provided information about the prevention from infection and about the symptoms of COVID-19 in Romani and Turkish. More than 2 000 brochures in Turkish and Romani were disseminated along with food, hygiene materials and other humanitarian products, which were donated through different campaigns by non-governmental actors. Other topics covered by the Bulgarian teams in relation to the pandemic were: information on the restrictions during lockdowns and how to distinguish between restrictions and discrimination; information regarding access to the online school; benefits for people who had lost their jobs/income because of the pandemic; access to health services. The teams also provided legal information about the protection against domestic violence, which increased during lockdown – a topic which will be addressed in more detail in a section below. In Romania, over 3 000 products for the prevention of COVID-19 infection were distributed (masks, disinfectants, milk, toys, sanitary pads). 2 000 masks were offered to the Roma community in one neighbourhood in Bucharest (Sector 5). The Romanian teams also distributed more than 1 000 templates for the mandatory declarations required by the authorities during lockdown in order to leave one's home and go shopping, to the pharmacy, etc. and identified and disseminated information on institutional and private initiatives which could be of service to the Roma during the pandemic. In Italy, the JUSTROM teams distributed sanitary materials, such as masks and disinfectants.

ASSISTING ROMA NAVIGATE THE VOLATILE AND CONFUSING PUBLIC INFORMATION LANDSCAPE

// Paradoxically, while women may be the least likely to demand and receive access to information, they are perhaps the most in need of it⁸ - a claim that was often heard by the JUSTROM team in Bulgaria.

■ Lack of information is one of the biggest barriers in the Roma community, as they often become victims of discrimination, stereotypes and prejudiced behaviour and, at the same time, in the absence of necessary information, they cannot make use of existing resources and support services.

■ It is in this context that, in addition to COVID-19 information as seen above, the JUSTROM teams disseminated information⁹ on the JUSTROM Programme, imparted information on how to access public social services (relief funding, emergency benefits, food stamps, debt relief, protection from eviction), and overall, **they assisted Roma in navigating the volatile and confusing public information landscape.**

■ Many Roma had difficulties in accessing social public services for several reasons: lack of or insufficient electronic devices, poor internet connection, low digital literacy skills. In this context, the JUSTROM3 teams assisted with training on how to scan, create/use emails, how to get the information and use services online, how to be safe on social media and to protect personal information.

■ In Romania, 25 Roma young and single mothers, elderly Roma women or Roma with different health problems were assisted in accessing such services.

■ In Bulgaria, the team highlighted the importance of asking for a registration number when declined information or assistance by the social workers. They were also advised not to sign documents without understanding their content.

I went to ask for the social benefits for winter heating. The social worker told me I did not have the right to it. I asked for a form to fill but she told me that there was no need to fill a form because anyway I did not have the right to this service. After the meeting [one of the awareness-raising meetings] I went again. She told me the same. Then I insisted on submitting a form and on getting a registration number. She started to yell at me, but I insisted. Finally, she took my application form. It turned out that I really had the right to these benefits and got them. But she wanted to spare some work and did not want to deal with me. (Roma woman, 34 years old, small village, Veliko Tarnovo region, Bulgaria).

■ When disseminating information to Roma, JUSTROM3 teams had to take into consideration that there are still topics which are considered taboo by the Roma communities, such as the topics of early marriages, domestic violence, etc. This is why, **when providing information, the JUSTROM3 teams took into consideration the diversity of communities.** In Bulgaria, for instance, Roma living in the Plovdiv region are highly religious (Muslim and Protestant) and this meant that for such traditional communities, especially when taboos were discussed, the presence of religious leaders played an important role. In some cases, their premises had been used for meetings. In all countries, it was important for the **JUSTROM3 teams to work closely with the NGOs that were already working in the area**, which facilitated the familiarisation of the communities with the Programme: Center Amalipe for the Veliko Tarnovo region and Gender Alternatives for the region of Plovdiv, for Bulgaria. In Greece, the NGOs “Antigone” and “STOP VIOLENCE” assisted the JUSTROM3 team with the awareness-raising events on gender-based violence.

8. Nauman, L. – The right to access information: Exploring Gender Inequalities, p. 83 in Edwards, D. and McGee, R. (eds), Opening Governance, IDS Bulletin, Transforming Development Knowledge, Vol. 47, Number 1, January 2016. https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/7692/IDSB_47_1_10.190881968-2016.108.pdf?sequence=1 Accessed on 12/02/2022.

9. The teams distributed educational materials, booklets, brochures and other resources to the community, reaching them in the streets and during awareness-raising gatherings. The brochures provided contacts, information and advice on how to seek legal aid.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence in the Roma communities is a complicated multi-faceted phenomenon. Moreover, Roma women often face discrimination deriving from stereotypes and prejudices – which increases the risk of violence against them in public interactions. For instance, in Greece,

one Roma woman who owns a small shop in Dendropotamos¹⁰ went to a large supermarket to buy products and resell them later from her shop. However, she was refused twice and, when she called the police, the employees stated, in front of the policemen, that if she filed a complaint, they would accuse her of stealing.

Such cases of discrimination against Roma women are further exacerbated, as in Greece, by weaknesses that exist in the legal system for combatting gender-based violence: lack of specially trained legal professionals (lawyers, judges, prosecutors); lack of substantial help to victims – for instance, while there are shelters for victims, there is not enough trained personnel (psychologists, lawyers etc) to provide the required help and information to victims.

Understanding what gender-based violence represents is, therefore, an important first step before seeking redress, and it should be a crucial phase of any awareness-raising campaign. Especially as, during the implementation of the JUSTROM3 Programme, the teams realised that many Roma women, especially the older generations, do not recognise gender-based violence against women and domestic violence as a problem in the community, but they normalise it, believing that violence towards women is normal. In many instances, early marriages, are not recognised as a gender-based violence category.

This is why awareness-raising events, mentoring sessions, training sessions, as well as legal consultations were good instruments to increase knowledge and prevention of violence against Roma women. Through such events, **Roma women were empowered to react against gender-based violence**, learnt how to recognise the different types of gender-based violence; became aware of basic tools and institutions relevant for seeking redress. Their knowledge was then disseminated to other women in the community through the outreach activities¹¹. During all these activities, Roma women had the opportunity to interact with legal consultants, police officers, experts and professionals of various fields for combatting gender-based violence, such as psychologists and criminologists. They understood the plethora of allies and institutions working on combatting the phenomenon. This is a telling example of how legal empowerment has the potential of empowering Roma women and advancing gender equality.

In Greece, for instance, they learnt how to file a complaint to the police, especially to the special department against gender-based violence and against racist violence¹², how to ask for legal aid in such cases and how to use available apps and other tools, such as the 15900 hotline¹³.

10. *Dendropotamos* is a neighbourhood in Thessaloniki. It has an estimated population of 5 000 with more than 95% being inhabitants of Roma origin. There is only one settlement with huts and tents in the area and all residents are living in houses.

11. For more, see the section below.

12. The special Police Department against Racist Violence has been operating in Thessaloniki since 2012 under the Hellenic Police. It manages the complaints and crimes on racist violence and it co-operates with state or non-governmental bodies, as well as European Union agencies in order to combat racist violence. It keeps statistics on incidents of racist violence, informs the victims or the complainants about their rights, and each year it drafts a report on cases of racist violence committed in the previous year, etc.

13. The national SOS 15900 24-hour helpline was set up in Greece in 2011. It is operated by the General Secretariat for Family Policy and Gender Equality and is in use 24/7, 365 days a year. It provides services in both Greek and English. The SOS line refers women to the Women's Counseling Center or to other support services. The aim is to provide information and counseling via phone to women suffering from any type of violence including domestic violence. <https://womensos.gr/en/15900-24ori-tilefoniki-grammi-2/>. Accessed on 12/02/2022

■ Various awareness-raising events as well as Training of Trainers events were organised by the JUSTROM3 teams in Greece throughout October-December 2020¹⁴ in order ensure sustainability for combatting gender-based violence. The topics discussed were:

- ▶ *types of violence towards women* (physical violence, verbal violence including hate speech, psychological violence, sexual violence, socio-economic violence, domestic violence and sexual harassment, child and forced marriages, female genital mutilation, forced abortion and forced sterilisation). There was also a discussion about forced marriages, sexual violence, including rape and forced abortion, and forced sterilization as forms of violence;
- ▶ *Legal tools* - the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence; the process of mediation in criminal cases of domestic violence according to the Greek law¹⁵; intersectional discrimination;
- ▶ *problems encountered at the level of institutions*: lack of legal structures in the community, such as legal mediators, counselling centres; lack of preventive mechanisms within local institutions; lack of a comprehensive perspective of gender-based violence (linking medical, legal, psychological and assistance with structural economic and housing problems); lack of data disaggregated by ethnicity;
- ▶ *problems encountered within communities*: lack of trust in institutions; fear of ostracism from the community if an incident is reported and/or the offender is prosecuted; negative experiences from recidivism of offenders and pressure from family members to drop the claims (for instance, the violent behaviour of a husband might be considered as just a bad temper or a breakdown, and women are pressured not to “destroy” their families – thus, in the eyes of the community, the victim becomes the perpetrator); lack of awareness of the different types of violence; normalising gender-based violence; patriarchal culture which maintains traditional gender roles in Roma communities and early/forced marriages;
- ▶ *COVID-19 related problems*: in case of violence, women would take refuge in their parents’ or other relatives’ houses, but this became virtually impossible during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

■ An awareness-raising event took place in October 2020, at the offices of “Roma Women Association of Dendropotamos”, Dendropotamos, Thessaloniki, Greece focused on: “**Understanding Stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination towards Roma**”. The event was attended by five women and the speakers were the Head of the Police Department for Combating Racist Violence, and a psychologist – victimologist. They talked about stereotypes, prejudices and their impact. The participants also learnt about where they could report any criminal behaviour towards them, which includes racist characteristics.

■ More specifically, the woman in Dendropotamos¹⁶, refused by supermarket employees from buying products, learnt that this incident was a case of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination and that she:

(...) should have told the policemen that the employees of the supermarket were being offensive and discriminatory because of her origin, and she should have filed a complaint. The policemen should have reported the incident to the special Department for Combating Racist Violence. It is often the case, as it was explained by the psychologist – victimologist, that when a Roma woman is in the middle of a situation like this, she might feel frightened, threatened and unprotected – which might even prevent her from reporting it to the police.

■ The Bulgarian JUSTROM team also focused on the protection against domestic and gender-based violence. It employed a gender-sensitive approach and paid special attention to overcoming harmful gender stereotypes, the normalisation of violence, discrimination, gender power relations, etc.

14. The gatherings took place at the offices of the “Roma Women Association of Dendropotamos”, Dendropotamos, Thessaloniki – Greece; they were attended by 5-8 Roma women.

15. According to the Greek law 3500/2006 for combating domestic violence there can be a penal mediation procedure in cases of domestic violence. The mediation can be applied only when a misdemeanor is committed (e.g. a crime of simple bodily harm, threat, insult or coercion). The authority responsible for the procedure is the state prosecutor and it can also be initiated at the defendant’s request. The mediation presupposes i) the defendant’s unconditional declaration and promise never to commit in the future any crime of domestic violence and, if the victim requests it, the defendants will leave the victim’s residency in cases of cohabitation, ii) attendance and participation at a special counseling psychotherapeutic programme for the defendant and iii) the victim’s compensation.

16. See above.

■ The teams identified some of the hardships faced by Roma women in Bulgaria in relation to gender-based violence:

- ▶ Gender-neutral policies and national strategies that prevent the recognition of gender-based violence and discrimination;
- ▶ Discrimination at the workplace –discrimination based on ethnicity preventing Roma women from getting jobs;
- ▶ Economic dependence – pay gap between women and men for the same work or as a result of barriers for women to access certain jobs (frequent absence due to child/elderly care; limited time because Roma women often have the sole responsibility of childcare and unpaid domestic work); poverty is feminised and therefore women struggle to have the resources necessary to access information;
- ▶ Technical barriers - power and economic disparities leading to a gender digital divide, impeding more women from accessing technology and the Internet compared to men; less women own their electronic devices and/or understand how they work;
- ▶ Lack of awareness and knowledge at the level of the institutions. Deadlines for submitting requests for child support, for instance, are not presented in user-friendly language – which creates insecurity and fear of accessing such support;
- ▶ Long-standing obstacles such as poverty, illiteracy and language barriers, that deprive women of the capacity to voice their concerns and claim their rights;
- ▶ Entrenched traditional attitudes and practices that enclose Roma women in their communities and normalise domestic and gender-based violence;
- ▶ COVID-19 and the spread of the pandemic further locked women and children in their homes, contributing to a rise in domestic violence and an increased need for support.

■ In summary, the awareness-raising events on gender-based violence proved to be an empowering tool for Roma women, and, as such, a good practice.

Mevlyan Kamberova –from a survivor of domestic violence to a role model for Roma women in Stolipinovo neighbourhood, Plovdiv, Bulgaria

“I was married for 12 years. During my first years of marriage, my relationship was thriving – I graduated from college and developed professionally in the social sphere – as a health mediator. During that time, I also became a mother of four children – a girl and three boys. However, my husband started drinking alcohol excessively. He became aggressive and changed moods constantly. He started beating me, even in the presence of the children. My oldest son always tried to protect me by standing between his aggressive father and me. I had to cover the bruises with make-up at work. Insults against the family were a constant part of his vocabulary. The violence continued for four years in which he tried to stop me from working. The moment when I decided to leave him was at a lunch gathering at his grand-mother’s apartment. He got so drunk that he tried to throw me out from the 8th floor of the building. I realised that I was in danger and got scared for myself and the children.

Around this period, in January 2020, I met the facilitators from the JUSTROM3 team who believed my story and supported me in leaving the violent relationship. I learnt about the Programme and the opportunities to participate and to share my story. That happened in March 2020, and two months later, in May 2020, I left with my children and got actively engaged with the JUSTROM team as a Roma woman-leader. During the outreach meetings with Roma women from the community, I talked openly about the violence I suffered, and I saw women’s reactions of support. Other women approached me with questions about how to cope with domestic violence in their lives. They asked me – how have you taken the decision to leave your husband; how should I share this with my family; what if my family doesn’t believe me?”

LEGAL EMPOWERMENT OF ROMA WOMEN

Roma women are often excluded from justice both due to their gender and their origin. Some of the barriers to the access to justice of Roma women are: lack of awareness of their rights; lack of knowledge about the available services and procedures; communication/language barriers; geographical isolation and inaccessibility of courts in their vicinity; and discrimination and stereotypes; lack of trust in state institutions and services. It also has to be taken into account that often the cases presented by the Roma are very intricate. As the Italian JUSTROM team put it: “(...) in many cases a single person has not just one case, but several, and that one problem uncovers more problems to be solved, like Chinese boxes; they fit into each other, almost as if one had ended up in a vortex without end, requiring in particular the JUSTROM legal consultants to work hard in order to find the puzzle”.¹⁷

— This is why, during JUSTROM3, **Roma women were legally empowered through several means:** (a) legal consultations; (b) access to guides on specific legal matters developed within the programme; (c) introduction of innovative institutional tools.

— (a) legal consultations

The teams covered an array of topics, either in person or (during lockdowns) via phone and online platforms:

- ▶ Information on COVID-19 restrictions and what to do in case of fines, but also on how to distinguish between restrictions and discrimination;
- ▶ Legal rights, responsibilities and violations of rights;
- ▶ How to request free legal aid;
- ▶ Information about the costs and expenses of basic legal and notarial acts (e.g. divorce and legal separation, parental recognition); the rights and responsibilities before and after signing contracts, such as loans;
- ▶ Information on debt collection companies and about their illegal tactics of harassing debtors;
- ▶ Information regarding family affairs (parental recognition, divorce, child custody, inheritance);
- ▶ Information on how to obtain ID documents, as seen below in a dedicated section.

In Romania, 50 Roma women benefitted from face-to-face and online counselling from March to July 2020. The cases were identified by the community facilitator during field work in the community. Most of the cases were related to fines for not wearing masks, others involved counselling for divorce procedures, access to education and social housing. Six Roma women received assistance in relation to domestic violence and forced evictions. The judicial counselling was offered in partnership with the Foundation for Mediation and Arbitration Chamber in Iasi (**Fundația Camera de Mediere și Arbitraj din Iași**), which offered two days of counselling every week. Lawyers from Iasi Bar provided pro-bono representation in front of the Iasi Tribunal.

On 14 April 2021, in Ses Bahlui neighbourhood in Iasi, Romania, two children, A. and R., together with their mother, Luciana V., went to the shop next to their house to buy food and protective masks. Before entering the shop they were stopped by two police officers, who fined the mother and escorted her home. On 19 April 2021, upon counselling offered by the Foundation for Mediation and Arbitration Chamber in Iasi, Luciana V. contested the fine. On 27 April, her appeal was approved and the fine erased.

17. Excerpt from the Italian country report for the JUSTROM Programme, 2021.

■ (b) access to guides on specific legal matters developed within the Programme – short manuals with information about some of the most common issues brought up by Roma (such as inheritance law, divorce and free legal aid). The guides were then used during the outreach activities as a way to further disseminate the legal information.

■ (c) introduction of innovative institutional tools

Given the intricate nature of many Roma legal cases, JUSTROM teams highlighted the importance of bringing **innovation in the legal assistance provided**. The Greek teams, for instance, underlined that in order for the provisions regarding free legal aid to be truly accessible, it is paramount to also have legal clinics/legal information centres working within the communities to explain the procedures to the beneficiaries. During the Programme, such clinics/legal information centres functioned in Italy at the Ilaria Alpi-Carlo Levi School in Scampia (Naples) and in the Dendropotamos area (Thessaloniki, Greece).

THE PERSONS WITHOUT IDs AND THEIR “NON-EXISTENT CHILDREN”: A FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Stateless persons and lack of ID documents were found by JUSTROM to be a widespread problem, which constitutes a significant barrier for Roma in accessing justice. The problem was identified in all four countries, while the issue of statelessness is particular for Greece and Italy. Despite the fact that in 1978-1979, the government of Konstantinos Karamanlis granted mass citizenship to undeclared Roma in Greece, currently thousands of Greek Roma in central and southern parts of Greece, including the Attica region, lack IDs¹⁸. As for Italy, there is a multiplicity of legal statuses that can be found even within the same family, which leads to a diversity of situations: Italian citizens, EU citizens, non-EU citizens, de facto stateless persons, etc.

■ In many cases it is not clear whether the persons are foreign citizens or people without any citizenship and therefore stateless. This uncertainty is often linked to the situation of marginalisation to which they are exposed: those who do not have the financial means to renew their passports or to register birth declarations with their consulates of origin may find themselves years later not knowing whether they or their descendants enjoy the citizenship of a state. Moreover, the fact that many Roma in Italy or at least their ascendants originate from the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia - a country which has split into many different autonomous states - complicated the situation, as people often had no established residence or legal status in that country and as they were abroad at the time of its dissolution, they did not take the necessary steps to obtain citizenship. Consequently, they can now find themselves without any citizenship or, in any case, in a situation of extreme difficulty in proving which citizenship they can claim.

■ People without IDs are institutional ghosts, and they have no rights, since they do not exist before the law.

■ The work conducted by the JUSTROM teams regarding this matter was threefold:

- ▶ (1) To inform Roma of how to get ID documents so they resolve their stateless status.
- ▶ (2) To improve the capacity of lawyers and other professionals in assisting Roma in obtaining ID documents.
- ▶ (3) To advocate the need to collectively address the problems faced by Roma who are stateless and/or without ID documents.

(1) Informing Roma of how to obtain ID documents

■ During the JUSTROM phases one (2017-2018) and two (2018-2019) almost 100 individual and 10 group sessions with Roma women were held in various locations in Greece¹⁹ on how to obtain free legal aid in order to receive assistance for getting their IDs. In Romania, more than 20 Roma women and their families were counselled on obtaining personal documentation (ID, property papers).

(2) Improving the capacity of lawyers and other professionals to assist Roma in obtaining IDs or citizenship

■ Given the complexity of the situations for the cases when Roma persons lack IDs and/or are stateless, the JUSTROM team in Italy provided information both to the beneficiaries and to the social workers or legal professionals working with persons of Roma origin on the documents needed for a thorough examination of the individual situation. The most frequent cases found in Italy are: how stateless persons and their children (especially in the cases when the children were born in Italy and lived there without interruption) could obtain citizenship; how a woman without documents can have her children, born in Italy, recognised.; how to prevent the expulsion of a person without documents and without a clear reference to a certain country; how to assist a foreigner in obtaining a stay permit in the event she is a victim of domestic violence.

18. Special report issued by the Ombudsperson in 2009 <https://www.synigoros.gr/?i=equality.el.imnnationetc.438344>. Accessed on 12/02/2020.

19. Mainly Halandri, Aspropyrgos and Menidi.

How can young Roma obtain Italian citizenship?

A significant number of young Roma in Italy in a situation of statelessness can have access to the procedures for acquiring citizenship by virtue of the so-called Kyenge Decree (Law-Decree No. 69/2013). More precisely, art. 33 (1) of the Decree states that the applicant for citizenship – who was **born and has always lived in Italy without interruption - is not responsible for “any failures attributable to his parents or to the offices of the Public Administration; and he/she can demonstrate the possession of the requirements with any suitable documentation”**.

In order to access this procedure, the JUSTROM team explained the need to collect and keep documentation such as vaccination certificates, school certificates, sports certificates, and so on, which can indicate that the person has lived in Italy without interruption.

■ The legal consultants in Italy also drafted a list of steps so that people could be directed towards the best legal pathways and the facilitators could assist both Roma communities and their lawyers:

How to proceed

STEP 1 **The first thing to do: interview the person concerned.**

The operator will ask the person concerned where he/she was born; who his/her parents are; where he/she has lived; if he/she has ever had any documents. A report should be prepared with all these data.

STEP 2 **The second thing to do: ask for and examine the available documents. The importance of the full birth certificate is to be stressed.**

Besides collecting the personal history of the person, it is also important to collect as many documents as possible. The most important thing is the so-called full birth certificate, i.e. showing the legal details of the parents. In this way, it will be known who recognised this person (for example, they may only have been recognised by their mother. In this event, checks should only be carried out with reference to the parent who recognised them) and where the person was born. Also important are any stay permits in Italy or certificates proving presence in Italy (medical documentation or proof of school attendance).

STEP 3 **The third thing to do: contact the consulate of origin of the parents or of birth.**

Once the countries concerned have been identified – which are almost always the country of birth or citizenship of the parents and the country of birth of the person concerned, it is necessary to contact the respective consulates to find out whether the person is a citizen and whether a passport can be issued (in which case the person is clearly not stateless) or a declaration of non-citizenship.

STEP 4 **The fourth thing to do: contact a lawyer.**

Once all these documents have been collected, a lawyer who is available to assist the person concerned will be sought to examine the situation and understand whether the person is stateless.

STEP 5 **How to help the lawyer in his or her work – the documentation for applying for free legal aid.**

The operator can do a lot to help the lawyer. For example, the tasks under the above steps 1 and 2 could be done by the lawyer, but if the operator or the person concerned could do that, it would be easier to proceed more promptly.

Furthermore, in order to access the free legal aid, the person concerned must make some declarations (for example, according to the practice in Rome, the applicant for statelessness, not having a consulate of reference, must declare before the municipality that he/she has no income in the country of origin. Since the municipalities are not always aware of this type of request for free legal aid, it is preferable that the person concerned be accompanied).

STEP 6 **What to do after the complaint for the determination of statelessness has been filed? How to obtain a stay permit while waiting for the judge's decision?**

If the Tribunal, at the request of the lawyer, issues a decree or order as a precautionary measure condemning the Immigration Office for the duration of the statelessness proceedings, the person concerned may present himself/herself at the Questura (police headquarters) to request the issuance of a permit to await statelessness, which may be renewed until the end of the judicial proceedings. The stateless permit can be converted into a work permit.

STEP 7 **What to do after obtaining the judicial decision establishing statelessness? How to obtain a stay permit and a travel document?**

Once you have obtained the judicial decision establishing your statelessness, you may present yourself at the Immigration Office with the decision authenticated by your lawyer and formalise your request for a stateless permit and a travel document.

STEP 8 **And after five years? The stateless person who wants to become an Italian citizen.**

After five years, the stateless person can apply for Italian citizenship by residence if s/he meets the requirements of social integration provided for by the law and the relevant provisions (see in particular Law No. 91/1992).

(3) To advocate on the need to collectively address the problems faced by stateless and/or Roma without ID documents

Advocate for stateless mothers who were losing their children

■ A particular issue identified in Athens by the JUSTROM team is where Roma mothers without ID documents (stateless in some cases) give birth in public maternal institutions and – after an order by the prosecutor – have their newborn child taken from them and given to a foster family or an institution.

■ JUSTROM consultants identified five similar cases in a 12-month period (during 2017-2018) in Athens, which indicate that the number of incidents could be even higher over time and perhaps in other locations too²⁰. According to the information given by the stakeholders, this practice most likely started in 2014 after an incident where a Roma family was suspected to be involved in child trafficking. Despite the fact that the accusation proved to have no grounds, this continued until 2018, when new legislation was introduced with the aim to stop such a practice, as a result of the interventions of the JUSTROM consultants and of the Deputy Ombudsperson for Children. However, incidents of Roma mothers with no ID documents not being allowed to take their new-borns have been again reported to the JUSTROM consultants by the Roma branch of the Halandri community center during the 2019-2021 period.

Advocacy campaign leading to a new procedure for identifying mothers with no ID documents and registering their children

- ▶ **Meetings** were held with parties involved in the practice: the social service and management of the main hospital where this practice was taking place in Athens, the prosecutors' office, the Deputy Ombudsperson for Children and the Special Secretariat for the Inclusion of Roma of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The JUSTROM consultants provided information on the practice, on its causes and its impact on Roma communities. Members of the team also wrote op-ed articles in major newspapers and online journals with wide national circulation across Greece in support of the campaign.²¹

20. In some of the cases, children were returned to their mothers after they managed to acquire ID documents, while in at least one case they did not as the baby had been handed to a foster family in the meantime.

21. <https://www.vice.com/el/article/3k99kj/h-istoria-ths-ellhnidas-roma-poy-ths-phran-to-paidi-epeidh-den-eixe-xartia>. Accessed on 12/02/2022.

The advocacy effort of the JUSTROM team **resulted** in the following documents:

- ▶ The intervention by the Deputy Ombudsperson for Children with document 231426/57008/2017 of 20.12.2017. This was directed to the hospital where the practice of separating mothers from their new-borns was mainly identified and it requested their co-operation in order to end the practice.
- ▶ The Parliament adopted article 62 of law 4554/2018 that established a new procedure in order to identify mothers with no ID documents and register their children at the registry office. This includes a provision to register mothers with no ID documents who give birth, so that an official link between them and their babies can be established; and register children even if their mothers have no ID documents²².

The **Success Factors** for this advocacy campaign were:

- ▶ Roma women contracted as consultants under the JUSTROM Programme increased the trust and access to the communities. Among them, a woman lawyer of Romani origin – the first Roma woman with a law degree in Greece.
- ▶ Referral of the cases to equality bodies and directly to the judiciary. Good co-operation with Roma community centres. Positive responses by the authorities and stakeholders, including the Ombudsperson for Children, the Special Secretariat of Roma Social Inclusion and the Secretariat on Citizenship.

22. The law makes reference to "(...) programmes by the Council of Europe that are implemented in Greece", making, thus, an indirect reference to JUSTROM.

EMPOWERING ROMA WOMEN LEADERS

With this part, the Programme shifted from a legal consultation *stricto sensu* to legal empowerment,²³ it started to slowly depart from that legal clinic model and gave more emphasis to collective and more sustainable initiatives. The idea was that Roma women leaders would take ownership of the JUSTROM Programme and provide information and support, along the principle “Roma women help Roma women”.

■ For instance, the facilitators in Greece, after the mentoring sessions with the lawyers and other professionals, are now aware of the legal aid procedure and they can disseminate this information to women in the community and to Roma women from the JUSTROM3 Outreach Team. They also possess the necessary skills and knowledge in various thematic areas and knowledge of institutions and structures to empower and support Roma women who seek redress of their grievances and access their rights.

■ The empowerment component of the Programme comprised of:

- ▶ (1) Mentoring sessions
- ▶ (2) Outreach activities
- ▶ (3) Meetings of Roma women leaders with public authorities

■ The mentoring sessions and outreach activities are closely linked: while mentoring helps Roma women leaders to develop personally and professionally, to meet the challenges in communities and to adapt to the needs of the community, the outreach activities are the results of the work and time spent in the communities.

■ The Programme enabled the creation of empowerment spaces that were both interpersonal and educational. Interpersonal, in that it encouraged relationship-building and interaction between vulnerable groups of women and women’s human rights advocates of the JUSTROM teams, including Roma women leaders. Educational, as the activities enhanced women’s know-how and offered opportunities for skills development (for example, by participating in training and mentoring sessions). In addition, such spaces provided a safe environment for the participants and helped them to better articulate their needs.

■ The JUSTROM Programme shed light on issues that disproportionately affects women, such as gender-based violence²⁴, and also raised awareness of the importance of women’s perspectives and experiences.

(1) Mentoring sessions

■ Until 31 December 2021 more than 70 people participated in Bulgaria in awareness-raising meetings and community outreach events. Meetings were held twice a month. The topics discussed were: human rights concepts and practical exercises for the deconstruction of gender-based violence concepts, discrimination, trafficking in human beings, economic empowerment, how to overcome the negative impact of COVID-19, including psychological support and application procedures for accessing the COVID-19 emergency fund put in place by the Bulgarian authorities.

■ In Romania, eight Roma women leaders were included in the Programme²⁵. They were school mediators, teachers, civil servants. Between September 2020 and June 2021, they participated in mentoring sessions in order to strengthen them individually and as a network, to improve their knowledge on issues such as intersectionality and discrimination, transgenerational trauma and learn how to engage other stakeholders in promoting issues of interest for the Roma communities.

■ Roma women leaders in Romania participated in four training modules:

- ▶ Module I – Personal development – to establish for each participant their personal motivations for joining the Programme and to identify their skills in order to become leaders in their communities;
- ▶ Module II – Networking Sessions – to prepare the leaders for outreach activities, and so that they gain experience in engaging with public institutions;

23. See also the sections above.

24. As seen in a section above.

25. Five in Bucharest and three in Iasi.

- ▶ Module III – Community Organisation on the representation of women (with a focus on Roma women) in the public sphere, and on how to get involved in decision-making processes;
- ▶ Module IV – Discrimination against Roma women. The module aimed to improve their information on the legislative framework of human and women’s rights, gender, roles and stereotypes, direct and indirect discrimination, multiple discrimination, affirmative action and equity, as well as on relevant legislation, institutions and opportunities for gender and minorities applicable in the European Union, with a focus on Romania.

■ During the mentoring Programme they also learnt and drafted advocacy campaigns in order to support the community²⁶. Specifically, they learnt to create an advocacy campaign, starting by identifying the common problem, setting goals, mapping the stakeholders and planning for activities. Roma women leaders identified issues in the community, such as access to water, property and identity documents and structured the campaign according to the mentioned steps, in the form of exercises during the meetings in the module. Each Roma women leader prepared a plan of activities for the community and meetings with the institutions, as well as a list of joint activities to be carried out by the network of women leaders in the Programme. They also planned regular meetings with people from communities, either existing leaders or Roma women willing to participate, and with representatives of municipalities.

■ In Greece, a total of 15 mentoring sessions took place in a physical format (with one exception), at the offices of the Roma Women Association of Dendropotamos. They were attended by an average of five women. The topics discussed were:

- ▶ Women’s rights and gender-based violence;
- ▶ Roma girls and their access to education: Social norms and barriers. Reasons for dropping out. Opportunities in education and employment, with a focus on the Second Chance School of Dendropotamos;
- ▶ Basic information about NGOs and their functioning (office management; organising events; synergies and co-operation with various authorities, NGOs and international organisations. Case study: the work of the “Roma Women Association of Dendropotamos”. The importance of volunteering;
- ▶ Opportunities of the labour market. How to create a CV. Getting prepared for a job interview. Training on computer and internet skills;
- ▶ Racism and Social Exclusion of Roma. Stereotypes, Prejudices and discrimination. Case study on forced evictions in Aspropyrgos;
- ▶ Promoting Roma women participation in democratic decision-making (discontent towards the political parties, phenomena as vote-buying and electoral fraud);
- ▶ Simulation Conference – Case study: “Roma Political School”. The participants were asked to organise a mock event for a “Roma Political School”²⁷).

■ Between November 2020 and June 2021, 18 additional mentoring sessions were co-organised in co-operation with the NGO “Solidarity Now”²⁸. The topics discussed were: safety on social media; how to plan an event for an NGO; workplace skills (adaptability, creativity, teamwork); gender-based violence; Roma history (with focus on Greek Roma and the history of the area of Dendropotamos); Romani language, religions and culture; Roma identity; history of women’s rights; women’s role in Roma communities, history and importance of International Roma Day.

(2) Outreach activities

■ They represent an element of sustainability for the Programme, aiming at the civic involvement of Roma women leaders in their communities. The purpose is two-fold: (1) to identify and encourage women to seek support and advice through informal meetings; (2) to make the Roma women leaders, beneficiaries of the mentoring programme, to use their skills and share the gained knowledge on topics of interest for the Roma communities.

26. See also the above advocacy campaign on changing the practice according to which stateless mothers lost their new-born children in Greece.

27. A Council of Europe initiative where Roma citizens are trained with the aim of bringing Roma closer to local, national and European decision – making bodies. For more, <https://rm.coe.int/roma-political-schools-23112021-en/1680a4a2e0>. Accessed on 12/02/2022.

28. Online sessions for Roma women on a regular basis (once a week). Two Lawyers and two facilitators, from the JUSTROM3 team, attended the sessions to provide information and to answer to the participants’ questions.

■ After the completion of the mentoring sessions, a team for outreach activities was formed in Greece, consisting of five Roma women who participated in the mentoring sessions.

■ In Bulgaria, the mentoring sessions and the training sessions, prepared Roma women leaders for the outreach work. They were, thus, prepared to provide information and support to Roma on issues affecting their human rights. For example, in the case of traditional practices – prevention of early marriages, Roma women leaders knew how to explain and encourage women and girls at risk that they could react against it and that they could find support from the institutions and other stakeholders.

■ Between March- August 2021, there were 60 outreach meetings organised in Romania, which were attended by more than 500 participants.

■ The topics discussed were: history of Roma; gender equality; segregation and discrimination; increasing self-esteem and civic involvement of Roma women in communities; entrepreneurs' rights; employment; international Roma women's movement; Roma Resistance Day; access to municipal services; access to education, medical and social protection systems.

■ Roma women leaders became positive role-models for the community - empowered Roma women who understand local contexts, know the neighbourhood or the region, have sensitivity regarding gender equality issues and are active agents of change in a difficult context.

■ Another important outcome from the outreach meetings and activities was a stronger understanding, on the one hand of **the importance of association** and, on the other hand, of the creation and support to specific Roma associations. In Greece, for instance, during the phases of 1 and 2 of the JUSTROM Programme, the "Parents Association of the 5th Intercultural Primary School of Dendropotamos"²⁹ was established thanks to the mentoring and support of the JUSTROM team. The association claimed their rights before the authorities, such as access to food distribution from the municipality to measures for facilitating the access of Roma children to online education.

One of the first COVID-19 cases in Greece was recorded in the 5th Intercultural Primary School of Menemeni in Dendropotamos³⁰, in early March 2020. Schools were immediately closed first by the mayor's decision and then by the State's. At the time of closing, parents from the Parents Association tried to contact the authorities in order to find out more information. The Parents Association also asked the JUSTROM3 team to assist them in writing a letter to the Directorate of Education with the aim of requesting a better communication in the future.

■ The JUSTROM Programme has also been instrumental in the strengthening and development of the Roma Women Association of Dendropotamos, which, as seen in the sections above, constituted an important hub for the development of activities and support for the communities during all the phases of the Programme.

(3) Meetings of the Roma women leaders with public authorities

■ Another element of the Roma women's empowerment process was the initiation of meetings between Roma women leaders and relevant institutions, where women discussed and presented to the institutions the cases and issues they had identified during community meetings. By linking the communities to existing services (legal assistance and municipal services, among others), the project managed to start **building trust between authorities and the Roma community**, with a special focus on Roma women leaders.

■ In Romania, for instance, Roma women met in June 2021 with medical staff from schools, with school mediators, school directors, counsellors and Roma experts working at local and regional level. The main issues were: the lack of access to water in the Alexandru-Ses Bahlui area³¹, Iasi County, and its impact on Roma children's health. Another issue brought up was the right of the Roma children from the same area to education, especially in winter, when it is difficult for the children to get to the schools. Also discussed was the issue of access to online

29. A telling example of JUSTROM2 in Thessaloniki was the establishment of the first second chance high school in the area where the Roma Women Association is premised. This was achieved by the JUSTROM team by providing a bridge between the beneficiaries and the local and national stakeholders through awareness raising gatherings. During July 2018, there were two awareness raising events with more than 50 Roma women participants.

30. The majority of pupils in this school are Roma.

31. A neighbourhood in Iasi county, with a majority population of Roma.

schooling. One result was that **Roma women** attending these meetings received more information on the issue and **acted as a liaison between the community and the public institutions**. This proved to be a good practice method of JUSTROM3 Programme.

■ Roma women from Greece organised meetings with the Equality Bodies and National Human Rights Institutions.

- ▶ During the awareness-raising event entitled “Long-term unemployment and Roma women”, the seven Roma women attendees from Dendropotamos and the surrounding areas (Kymina, Malgara) who work as small-scale traders in the local open-air markets wrote a letter to the Secretary General for Social Solidarity and Fight Against Poverty (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) and to the Minister of Development and Investments to present their situation and ask for supportive measures.

■ The problems identified in the letter: a) The small-scale traders have a stock of industrial goods such as clothes, shoes, and blankets they could not sell. These products are for the winter season so no one will buy them when the open-air markets reopen in May 2020, when the lockdown will end. b) They made no profit so they cannot buy new products to sell at the market during the spring-summer season. They also have debts to the suppliers and to the state (tax and social security). c) The State gave some of them an allowance of 800 euro for April to confront the current financial crisis, but it is sufficient only for their most immediate needs (feeding, health, electricity, etc).

■ Through the above-mentioned letter they asked for supportive measures such as a) to extend the granting of emergency financial assistance by the Employment Organisation to all Roma women who remain unemployed for more than 24 months, b) to establish tax and financial incentives by the State for companies to hire the unemployed from the special category of long-term unemployed Roma women, c) to take positive measures and subsidised actions for training and certification of knowledge and skills of Roma women in technical professions and d) to provide business grant programmes specifically for Roma women.

■ A third pillar of the Programme³² revolved around **increasing synergies and partnerships**.

■ In Bulgaria, the JUSTROM team contacted stakeholders and institutions to refer cases on domestic violence, early marriages, trafficking in human beings, discrimination, rights of people with disabilities, access to social support. The institutions contacted were: the Crisis center for women victims of violence, the Social services and child protection department, Center for Social Innovations, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. The Municipalities of Plovdiv and Veliko Tarnovo were interested in further. Memoranda of Understanding were signed.

32. The two other objectives, as mentioned earlier, are empowering Roma women and enhancement of professional resources.

A GOOD PRACTICE FOR INCREASING THE REPORTING ON RACIST VIOLENCE

During JUSTROM3, consultants in Greece established co-operation with the Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN)³³. The co-operation focused in Halandri area (Athens) and assisted the network to significantly increase its reporting of racist crimes against Roma.

The objective of the co-operation was to: increase reporting of incidents of racist violence against Roma and in particular Roma women. To that end, training and awareness-raising sessions were organised among Romani and other civic society associations on issues of racist violence, racist crimes, hate speech and discrimination. A representative of the Network participated as a guest speaker in two “cascade training sessions” organised by JUSTROM, directed to municipality staff of social services, lawyers and other professionals. Ten Roma women, including mediators and fifty other professionals were trained.

Moreover, JUSTROM consultants assisted RVRN to gather information either by networking them with Romani associations and other institutions who had witnessed the event, or with other Roma from various settlements across Greece and, in particular, in the locations of the implementation of JUSTROM.

RVRN enhanced its communication with Roma women for reporting on incidents of racist violence against them after the JUSTROM consultants shared information on such topics. JUSTROM legal consultants together with the coordinator of RVRN also participated in individual consultations sessions with victims of incidents of racist violence in order to facilitate reporting.

Three meetings were organised between the Roma women leaders co-operating with the JUSTROM Programme in Athens (Halandri) and Thessaloniki (Dendropotamos) and the RVRN representative. The purpose of these meetings was to share information and experiences and discuss ways to increase reporting of incidents of racist violence against Roma. There were also tools provided for the identification of the incidents of racist violence, incidents of hate speech and particularly the incitement to violence, which is criminalised under the Greek penal code, as well as incidents of discrimination clarifying also the pathways for submitting a complaint.

JUSTROM consultants, in co-operation with the Network and the Halandri Municipality Roma branch facilitated reporting to the Network of racist crimes against Roma. This co-operation had as a result **three incidents of racist violence** against Roma which were recorded for 2020. It remains a small number but it constitutes a qualitative change compared with zero or one incident against Roma which was recorded in the previous years, and comparing to an average of more than 100 racist crimes reported per year by the RVRN³⁴.

Success Factors – the main factor for success was the direct engagement of Roma women and their access to the Roma communities, together with the methodology and the work done by the Racist Violence Recording Network.

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33. Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN) is a coalition of 51 agencies which provide medical, social and legal aid and/or come into direct contact with the victims of racist violence. RVRN was established in 2011 at the initiative of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Greece (UNHCR) and the Greek National Commission for Human Rights (GNCHR), on the basis of two major findings: (i) the absence, at that time, of an official and effective data collection system on racist violence and (ii) the need to coordinate organisations which recorded, on their own initiative, incidents of racist violence against people who sought their services. RVRN: i) submits recommendations to the Greek authorities in compliance with Greek and international law on the protection of human rights, ii) promotes public information and awareness-raising on combatting racist violence, iii) it consults with various actors on issues pertaining to racist violence, iv) strengthens collaboration with other actors in pursuit of combatting racist violence, v) organises and participates in training programmes held by civil society and other competent institutional bodies in relation to issues that refer to the identification, recording, and combating of hate crimes. RVRN records cases exclusively on the basis of interviews conducted with the victims. Each RVRN organisation member appoints focal points to record the incidents, i.e. social workers, lawyers, or other professionals or volunteers, who are trained by RVRN. The appointed focal points are named and bear the responsibility of their recording. Recording forms are completed anonymously and used exclusively by RVRN for the purpose of combating racism and hate crimes.
34. More information can be found in the [RVRN Annual Report for 2020](#) (Chapter B, Attacks against Greek citizens due to ethnic origin and colour, page 34). Accessed on 12/02/2022.

Lessons learnt

Racist violence experienced by Roma, and in particular by Roma women, remains largely unreported. This is due to a variety of reasons, including structural barriers the victims face when it comes to reporting, fear of retaliation, lack of faith that their complaints will have a result and also limited access of civil society organisations to the Roma communities to help them overcome these barriers. Networking, training and increased access to Roma communities can increase reporting.

Conclusions

Racist violence against Roma and in particular Roma women is significantly underreported compared to reporting by other vulnerable groups. The RVRN was recording zero incidents of racist violence against Roma per year, in comparison to an average of more than 100 incidents in total. Synergies with equality bodies, municipalities and civil society organisations can improve reporting and make racist violence against Roma visible. Access to justice for Roma women is enhanced through co-operation with organisations that work on this component. JUSTROM facilitated promoting this aspect and increasing the reporting of racist violence against the Roma communities. Despite the fact that this co-operation mainly focused on Halandri Municipality (in the Athens area), the RVRN has managed to sharply increase its recording of racist violence incidents against Roma and to also build links with Roma women and civil society organisations in order to facilitate the reporting in the future.

CO-OPERATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

Part of the sustainability of the Programme is ensured thanks to the creation of partnerships with various organisations, institutions and authorities in all the four countries.

■ The Italian JUSTROM team has been part of national and/or local working tools, such as the Roma, Sinti and Caminanti Inclusion Working Group of the Municipality of Naples, where a new Local Inclusion Plan was drafted; the team also participated in the National Working Group on Statelessness, led by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (in Rome).

■ In Bulgaria, the JUSTROM team established partnerships with the local and central authorities and civil society organisations.

■ A good working practice was adopted in Bulgaria, **where an Advisory Board was established under JUSTROM**, in order to guarantee the smooth implementation of the activities and of the institutional assistance. The Board held regular meetings, which allowed for the monitoring of the Programme, feedback and recommendations towards the improvement of services, legislation and access to vulnerable groups of people. It included representatives of the National Ombudsman, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, the Secretariat of National Council for Co-operation on Ethnic and Integration Issues (the National Focal Point for the Implementation of the National Strategy for Roma Inclusion) and the National Legal Aid Bureau (a state body which manages the provision of legal aid in Bulgaria). This co-operation meant that JUSTROM teams were involved in the implementation of the national and municipal strategies for Roma inclusion.

■ Synchronised and cumulative data concerning women's access to justice was analysed and provided periodically. In this regard, the JUSTROM team introduced to the municipal institutions gender disaggregated data.

■ Local and national authorities also got involved in the Programme: for instance, many meetings in Bulgaria took place at the Health Centre of Stolipinovo, which was granted as a space for JUSTROM activities by the local municipality in Plovdiv³⁵.

■ In Romania, several co-operation agreements were signed with central public institutions, local authorities and human rights organisations. Partnership agreements were concluded with the National Agency for Roma, the Ombudsperson's Office, the National Council for Combatting Discrimination, the Foundation Mediation and Arbitration Iași, the Iași Bar, the Faculty of Communication Sciences, and the Ecological University of Bucharest.

■ Thanks to the co-operation with the National Agency for Roma, all JUSTROM events in Bucharest were organised at the office of the National Agency for Roma and the co-ordinator of the project in Romania was invited to the national and regional meetings concerning the drafting of the Romanian Government Strategy for the inclusion of the Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority 2021-2027. In this context, the Romanian JUSTROM team advocated for the introduction in the strategy of activities similar to the awareness-raising activities and outreach activities in JUSTROM3 in the Roma communities, as well as meetings aimed to facilitate the dialogue between Roma women and public authorities.

■ Overall, the JUSTROM Programme **has created a new pool of professionals** – steady allies for the Roma communities.

35. The centre is visited by Roma women from local communities where they can benefit from informational and health services free of charge so that adequate help is secured in one place. Also, the centre became a place where awareness-raising meetings and mentoring sessions were organised which further gave women security and trust in JUSTROM as the activities happened on a rolling basis. They learned that there they can rely on legal support and often referred to the centre to inquire for the JUSTROM team and its services.

■ As mentioned previously, the Foundation Mediation and Arbitration Chamber in Iasi (Romania) was instrumental in providing legal counselling. As a result of this partnership, 50 Roma women were counselled on issues such as discrimination, risk of forced evictions and challenging in court the abusive fines received during the emergency in place in Romania due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The partnership proved to be successful, with the community facilitator identifying the cases and guiding them towards the Foundation Mediation and Arbitration Chamber in Iasi, who, in turn, counselled the Roma women³⁶. Furthermore, the foundation organised a training course on combatting racism and discrimination for its volunteers and employees so that they had a better understanding of the issues with which the Roma community in Iași is dealing. The training course was attended by 45 lawyers and legal advisors from Iasi and Vaslui Bar³⁷.

■ Another training course took place in April 2021³⁸. It was organised with the support of Iași Bar and the topics discussed were Roma history, the work of Roma organisations to combat discrimination and the importance of the National Council for Combatting Discrimination. 35 lawyers attended the training.

■ Another promising good practice stems from the partnership initiated by the Romanian JUSTROM team with the Faculty of Communication Sciences (Ecological University of Bucharest).

■ More precisely, two debates were organised in May 2020. The topics discussed were mass-media reports and representation of Roma during the pandemic, particularly the scapegoating and incitement to hatred, as well as the hate speech against Roma and the negative effects on the Roma community. 25 students participated in the debates.

36. The counselling took place face-to-face and online, two days/week, from March to July 2020.

37. The training course took place on 26 March 2021, online, with 45 lawyers and legal advisors from Iasi and Vaslui Bar

38. It was held online. Also, thanks to the partnership with Iași Bar, six Roma women received assistance in March 2020. The cases concerned domestic violence and forced evictions. The lawyers provided pro-bono representation in front of the Iasi Tribunal.

CONCLUSIONS

The European Union and the Council of Europe Joint Programme “Roma Women’s Access to JUSTICE – (JUSTROM3)” played a pivotal role towards the empowerment for Roma women in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Romania. Legal empowerment was an important component, as Roma women were acquainted with their rights and with avenues for seeking redress. Issues such as gender-based violence and stateless persons and/or persons without IDs were thoroughly considered and acted upon. Thanks to an advocacy campaign conducted by the JUSTROM team in Greece, stateless Roma mothers no longer have their new-born children taken away from them. Several partnerships and co-operations were created, which led to increased synergies and better dialogue between Roma women and authorities. Overall, the programme created a new pool of professionals-steady allies for Roma communities. More than 40 Romanian lawyers and legal advisors, for instance, received training on Roma history and discrimination.

■ Facilitators working within the JUSTROM3 Programme have identified a number of 37 Roma women who were trained and mentored to become community leaders and take initiative to represent their communities. The Roma women were trained on various topics such as basic principles of human rights, provision of legal aid, family law issues, children’s rights and statelessness, social and health rights, and others. They also benefited from mentoring sessions on opportunities in education and employment, on how to set up an NGO, on vocational guidance, on the Roma women participation in decision making, etc.

■ Following the JUSTROM3 mentoring programme, the Roma women leaders have organised more than 200 outreach activities in various settings, including in schools and in their communities. The activities varied in nature and represented a first important step for the Roma women community leaders to put into practice the skills learned during the mentoring sessions.

■ The practices developed during JUSTROM Programme, the trained human resources and, in particular, the capacity building component of it, have created the premises for the development of the non-governmental sector working for the rights of Roma women. In Greece, steps have been taken by several JUSTROM collaborators to establish an organisation which will focus on research, advocacy and empowerment for Roma communities, and of Roma women in particular. The initiative will involve the Roma women leaders benefiting from the JUSTROM mentoring programme, as well some of the facilitators and lawyers collaborating with the JUSTROM team in Greece. A similar initiative was developed in Romania by a group of JUSTROM Roma women leaders and one of the Programme’s facilitators.

■ The JUSTROM teams proved to be adaptable and resilient in the face of the new challenges brought by the pandemic. They understood the importance of diversity, especially when working with more traditional, religious communities and they came up with innovative solutions: from the use of storytelling in Bulgaria, to coupling legal aid with legal clinics, in Italy.

■ Roma communities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic in all areas: from access to justice and healthcare, to housing, education and employment. The pandemic acted as an accelerator which aggravated pre-existing serious issues that Roma communities were already facing; inequalities in health, employment, education, etc. only grew higher. Many services in the Council of Europe adapted their work programmes to respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Although activities to alleviate the negative impact of the COVID-19 health and sanitary crisis on Roma communities were originally not foreseen in JUSTROM Programme, these were also adapted to address the needs of the communities.

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