

THROUGH SPACES OF MARGINALIZATION AND RACIALIZATION



Roma Forum of Serbia, 2022.

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– Introduction

To talk about spaces on the capitalist periphery means, above all, to think spatiality through class, racialized, ethnicized, gendered and other inequalities. This is precisely the way spaces are created in the capitalist system of production. For this reason, this year's political education project of the *Roma Forum of Serbia* has focused on the topic of housing which also permeates most part of this publication. In a sense, all the texts here are about space. If we understand that housing spaces cannot be thought separately from the spatialities that constitute each other, then housing spaces, urban spaces, educational spaces, discursive spaces, legal spaces, strategy spaces and institutional spaces are closely connected.

At the beginning of a new "decade", not much changed when the institutions adopted the key document for policies

that address Roma communities.¹ The Roma, who live in poverty, are pushed into substandard settlements that exceed 700 while inadequate and precarious housing spaces multiply without significant and long term solutions.

Moreover, members of Roma communities are significantly affected by all forms of homelessness in Serbia. Forced evictions remain a common practice and a threat; schools continue to be places where racism and discrimination of all kinds persist; early marriages are still a popular NGO theme, with no solutions and cultural-racist overtones being reflected through the saviorist narrative. At the same time, a large number of people still do not have electricity, mostly Roma women and men.

Thus, if you thought that we do not live in capitalism: welcome to the hell of reality.

In capitalist regimes, spaces are created through a web of marginalizations, exploitations, oppressions, disciplines, and inequalities. One of the ways in which inequalities are produced is through the dynamics of *racialization*. For some time, in our publications, we have tried to use this term in its dynamic form: therefore, we do not speak of race (because races do not exist, even modern biology has distanced itself from the problematic essentialist discourse), but of racialization or the phenomena that are racialized. In this way, we emphasize that racialization is a process, a kind of dynamic, repetition, complex mechanism that constitutes something as "racial" and crystallizes racialized identities through relations of production and other relations. This process takes place in a structured way. That is why it looks like a natural phenomenon: it has

¹ Since this year, a new Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia is implemented for the 2022-2030 period

been naturalized. It's been manufactured that way; it's been normalized, which is why it doesn't look like an excess but rather like something normal and usual.

The same thing happens with the notion of gendering. Instead of talking about gender as a fixed entity, we find that complex processes of gendering are at work. Certain bodies are gendered in one way, others in another while the third are rejected as not conforming to the norm, and so on. Gendered identities are also dynamically and socially constituted, like any other identification. Identities are thus never completed once and for all, but are constantly constituted, produced, contested, and acquired. Not because we choose it to be so, but because there are more robust structures and mechanisms that make it so. Bodies are never purely biological; they are also sociobiological. But, the identities that the current system imposes on us do not come close to covering all the possibilities that we could be in a freer society.

The same applies to racialization and ethnicization. The fact that certain human beings are treated as Roma has more to do with social structures and power relations than with the free choice of these people. It might have been a matter of free choice if we had lived in a free world, but as things are, it just seems like we are choosing. However, a large number of people are forced to live in extremely inadequate spaces or be homeless simply because they are racialized, ethnicized, gendered and made to belong to a lower class, and this reality is certainly not the result of their free choice.

The spaces that racialization assigns to those who are in fact rejected are densely populated. Thus, in the first text of

this publication, *Housing Issues of the Roma and Increasing Urban Inequality*, author Sevdulje Ramadani addresses capitalist cities as essentially non-inclusive spaces. She shows that this is not just a problem of some peripheries but that spaces throughout capitalism are intertwined with inequalities. Geopolitical inequalities and marginalizations are not a byproduct but rather a feature of capitalistic spatialities. In post-socialist countries, this is exacerbated by the restoration of capitalism or the introduction of the logic of market-based urban planning and housing. In such a context, housing exclusion co-constitutes all other social exclusions, so the problems of the Roma community are by no means only related to the housing. The author insightfully demonstrates why existing solutions are inadequate and short-term, and argues for long-term and *institutional* solutions, as well as for the political participation of the Roma in urban planning.

Paola Yo, in her text *The Shades of Roma Homelessness* reminds us that there are several types of homelessness and that it does not only mean that someone literally lives on the street. According to a more nuanced classification of homelessness, Roma communities are the largest homeless population in Serbia, as most Roma live in some form of homelessness. The author points out the violence produced by constant forced evictions and the problem of the neoliberal model of social housing. In addition, she questions the ideologems that underpin this reality, creating the illusion that the homeless are to blame for their situation. The author points out that it is better to use the term “person in a homeless situation” rather than “homeless person.” Those who find themselves in such a situa-

tion cannot be responsible for it; rather, they are forced into it. The text offers some strategies for helping persons in a homeless situation and also shows that the problem is systemic and cannot be solved without self-organization and fundamental social change.

In the text *The Roma Community in Niš (Again) Without Electricity*, Robert Kasumović describes the situation in the settlement “12 Februar” in Niš, whose residents have been without electricity for more than 6 months. After a historical overview of the origins and development of this settlement, the author shows that the socialist regime tolerated the populating of this and similar spaces. Capitalism, on the other hand, transforms social and public housing into private housing, making these settlements an easy target for private capital. In this way, Roma communities are constantly threatened with forced evictions, while any form of attempt by the Roma to legalize ownership of such spaces is not in the interest of the state, which is closely linked to private capital. Thus it is possible to cut off the electricity to a large part of the population. It is also possible to turn it back on just before the elections, making a plethora of promises, as is already the case with election whims, only to turn it off again immediately after the elections. This aptly captures the lack of political will to find a solution to the issue.

Marina Salić writes about a similar topic. The text *What is the Future of the Roma Who Live on the Rim of the Bor Mine?* describes how an inadequate settlement was created on the edge of a copper mine. Many of the poor members of society who moved into the previously abandoned workers’ shacks belong to the Roma community. While this act was tolerated un-

der socialism, the prospects of these households are becoming more and more uncertain under capitalism, especially after the new foreign investor moved to the area. The informal settlement on the outskirts of the Bor mining and smelting basin is now largely owned by the Chinese company “Zijin”. It is very uncertain how the owners of the company, together with the representatives of the local authorities, will decide on the situation of the people who have been living in these barracks for years and decades. Until they make a decision, the Roma live in very bad, even very dangerous conditions: the barracks are old and unstable, there is no insulation and the roofs leak, the trees fall down near the houses, there is no sewage system or street lighting, etc. Nevertheless, the author makes some concrete proposals for solving these problems, even if she ends the text in a sceptical tone about the willingness of the state and local authorities to really do something.

Dina Vučković is the author of the text *What Happens When School Is Not Mandatory?* which mainly analyses the situation in educational spaces. However, the author also establishes a connection between the educational and housing spatiality, as she comes to the logical conclusion that those who do not have adequate housing conditions also do not have basic requirements for education. Based on the statistics, the author asks about the reasons that cause Roma children to drop out of education, a phenomenon that increases in secondary education. Some of these reasons are: poverty and lack of material conditions, gendered discrimination (which causes girls to drop out of school in much greater numbers than boys, and is also related to the phenomenon of early marriage), lack of support, and

often open hostility from the environment. Racist ideologems, stereotypes, and prejudices further exacerbate all of the above factors. The author outlines a dropout prevention model as well as several strategies that would make it easier for individuals to enroll in and complete high school.

In the text *Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Territory of the City of Belgrade for the 2022-2032 Period: New Hope for Old Problems?* Aleksandar Marković questions the new legal framework that will determine all policies related to Roma communities in the coming decade. He analyses the strategy for the city of Belgrade, which addresses the situation in Roma communities through eight priority areas (combating ciganism, poverty and social exclusion, participation, education, housing, employment, health, social protection). The author outlines some of the problems related to the approaches presented in the Strategy, such as: inadequacy of the social entrepreneurship model, gender discrimination (implied already in the formulation of the position of health care mediators, which is presented in the feminine grammatical gender), a social policy based more on the workfare than on the welfare doctrine, etc. Although the Strategy sets all-encompassing and ambitious goals, the author is sceptical about its implementation and ends the text in a rather resigned tone: We wait and see how things will turn out.

The publication concludes with a text by editor Maja Solar entitled *Saviour and Cultural-Racist Tones of the Early Marriage Narrative*, which questions some of the issues of the early marriage narrative. Although the phenomenon of early marriage is more present in public discourse, the elements of

this discourse seem to be highly problematic, often implying culturally racist, individualistic, reductionist-feminist, patronising and carceral frameworks. These narratives often hypocritically claim a right to childhood while completely overlooking the fact that we live in a world where segregation of children is constantly produced, so that it separates those who are privileged from those who are denied almost everything, criminalised, and deprived in many ways. Consequently, it is legitimate to question the role of *the judiciary, the courts, the state*, and other levers of capitalism in creating inequality, and not to view them as neutral entities. The discussion of early marriage is not only a matter of opinion, but also of politics. At the end of the text, the author describes the currents of progressive feminisms that place this phenomenon in the perspective of emancipatory politics.

We thought the spaces and the violences that are created by the spatialities. And we imagined the spatialities that would be different. Freer for *all*.

December, 2022.

Editor, Maja Solar

– **HOUSING ISSUES OF THE ROMA AND INCREASING URBAN INEQUALITY**

Nowadays we are the witness of smart cities development as well as modern gigantic urban projects. Yet, we also see that urban inequalities are growing and that “progressive societies” are not able to solve the housing crisis and find a solution for more accessible and available housing for all. On a global scale, the number of homeless people is enormous. Simultaneously, in the deprived settlements of post-industrial cities, urban poverty is growing, characterised by precarious work, the withdrawal of the state from social policies, and the dismantling of social services measures. Modern cities are centres of capital accumulation and decision-making, but also the space of accumulation and materialisation of inequalities (class, racial, gender). Far from being inclusive, cities are not tailored to the needs of the majority of their citizens.

The so-called transitional period that began in the 1990s in post-socialist cities has led to dramatic changes in the field of residential construction and housing. As a result, housing question was no longer the responsibility of the public, but of individual citizens. The introduction of the market in residential construction required a new housing policy in urban planning and neglected the social character of housing, which affected socially vulnerable groups.² Roma communities were undoubtedly among the affected population groups. Some authors claim that the transition period “significantly accelerated the downward mobility of Roma households, who were the first victims of social and economic changes throughout the region. Moreover, the housing exclusion is the result of broader processes of social exclusion.”³ This contextualization should by no means be neglected, as it shows that the socio-historical changes affected the Roma population in particular, while the housing problems faced by many members of Roma communities are long-term and systemic.

The commercialization and privatisation of social housing is accompanied by an individualistic ideology. According to this, it is the individual’s own fault if they do not have adequate housing conditions, as if it were due to their character and lack of success. However, when the Roma find themselves in this situation, deeply rooted stereotypes and prejudices are activat-

2 Vukadinovic, V. (2010). *Urban Planning of Novi Sad in the Period of Post-Socialism*. SAJ - Serbian Architectural Journal, 2(2), 155-180. <https://doi.org/10.5937/SAJ1002155V>

3 Berescu, C., Petrovic, M., & Teller, N. (2012). *Housing Exclusion of the Roma: Living on the Edge*. In: *Social Housing in Transition Countries* (0 ed.). Routledge, p.98 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203095904>

ed in the perception of the majority population. As a result, the Roma are stigmatised both because of their poor housing conditions and their ethnicity, and are perceived as those who do not “deserve” to receive state-supported assistance.

Although the housing situation of the majority of the Roma population is alarming, strategic documents – from the international and national levels to the municipal level (if any) – explicitly mention housing as the key to improving the situation of the Roma in Serbia. Despite numerous adopted documents, strategies, and plans, in practice, no significant improvements in the housing situation of the Roma population are evident. In some cases, the situation is even worsening as the vulnerable Roma population faces increasing discrimination and their human rights are constantly violated. There are numerous examples of forced evictions of Roma households. In late 2018, about forty Roma families were displaced from the municipal landfill in Vinča, near Belgrade, so that a waste incinerator could be built. They had worked at the landfill as secondary raw material collectors and lived in the barracks, losing their homes and income. The authorities carried out the eviction process violently, ignoring international and national procedures for the protection of human rights.⁴

The housing problems are manifold. In addition to the above-mentioned human rights violations during the eviction of Roma informal settlements, there are other problems: the constant threat of forced evictions, the segregation of Roma settlements, the lack of infrastructure, insufficient access to

⁴ <https://podcast.rs/show/inicijativa-a11/>

utility services, the lack of proper urban planning, the unclear legal status of property ownership, the lack of support for housing, etc.

What is the current housing situation of the Roma population in Serbia? What are the consequences of the housing problem for Roma citizens? What are the authorities doing (or failing to do) to solve the housing problems of Roma communities in Serbia? We will try to analyse these points in the rest of the text.

Current housing situation: alarming

Due to the lack of housing support for the Roma population, they mostly live in substandard Roma settlements, usually without adequate access to basic utilities and usually in worse conditions than the non-Roma population. Thanks to the existing efforts to map substandard Roma settlements certain data on the number and nature of these settlements are available. Recently, the United Nations Human Rights Office, in cooperation with the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Association of Roma Coordinators, implemented the project: *Mapping of Substandard Roma Settlements According to Risks and Access to Human Rights with Particular Attention to the COVID-19 Pandemics*.⁵

⁵ Publication is also available in English: https://serbia.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/web-mapiranje_podstandardnih_romskih_naselja-27-11-eng%20%28002%29.pdf

The total number of mapped substandard Roma settlements in the Republic of Serbia is 702 and the number of their inhabitants is 167.975.⁶ When we observe more nuanced data, it is clear that most of the mapped substandard Roma settlements are in Belgrade (122) as well as the highest number of the Roma population (43.944 inhabitants). Although their relevance can be taken with reserve, especially when it comes to the number of inhabitants,⁷ such data still provide a starting point for reflection on cities as key intersections in which social inequalities ostensibly manifest in the physical space.⁸ Cities are places whose organization is hierarchical, racial, and class-based, with asymmetric power relations and access to resources, hence, they generate increasing urban inequalities. In Belgrade, urban inequalities are at the highest level in Serbia. Consequently, a significant number of the Roma citizens live in substandard conditions and are in a vulnerable position. It seems that other cities follow such class-racial logic, however to a smaller extent.

The quantitative data indicates that access to resources and possibilities for improved conditions, as well as basic utility services, is very bad or none at all. From the overall number of

6 Ibid

7 It is highly possible that the number of inhabitants is higher but the mapping did not include some of them for various reasons, such as lack of personal documents, etc.

8 This is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's thesis that the social space is materialized in the physical space; the rarest commodities and their owners are concentrated in a certain place in the physical space (i.e. Madison Avenue), while there are locations in which the most vulnerable social groups gather (i.e. poor suburban areas, ghettos, etc) See: Bourdieu, P., & Accardo, A. (Eds.). (1999). *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Stanford University Press, p.125.

the mapped substandard settlements, access to potable water does not exist or is irregular in 159 (23%) of the substandard settlements, the access to an electric grid does not exist or is irregular in 64 substandard settlements (9%), and up to 457 substandard settlements (65%) has very irregular or no access to the sewage system; while 44 substandard Roma settlements (6%) have very limited or no access neither to clean water, electric grid nor to a sewage system. Such data demonstrate that a significant portion of the Roma population has alarming housing status and inadequate housing conditions. The state-provided housing aid is mostly inaccessible, so the inhabitants of the settlements mostly try to improve their living conditions on their own, within the limits of their capacities. For example, to find a solution for the lack of a sewage system, many build septic tanks. Generally, a vast majority of the inhabitants of substandard settlements cannot afford to rent a place in the city or cover their utility bills. Thus many Roma citizens remain in settlements with inadequate dwellings and deprived living conditions.

In my activist work – above all in Novi Sad, where I have worked the most – I have seen examples of individuals who buy houses in the countryside. The market price of housing units in the countryside is significantly lower than in the towns and cities. Hence, it seems impossible to solve the housing question and keep one's place in the game in which significantly unequal positions (racialized, ethnicized, and class-based) are already well established.

The members of Roma communities who live outside substandard Roma settlements also frequently have housing is-

sues. Employment issues, discrimination in the labour market, and low income often result in unpaid electricity and utility bills. This is the most frequent problem for those who benefit from social housing programs funded by the state. Even though a household receives a social housing unit (which happens very rarely, for instance, after a displacement) the bills that ensue are incomparably higher than the income that the family can obtain. Therefore, the existing neoliberal model of "social" housing does not solve the housing issues of marginalized and deprived citizens.

Housing issues have multiple consequences

The housing issues of the inhabitants of substandard Roma settlements are complex and have multiple consequences. It is common knowledge that the life expectancy of the Roma is much shorter than that of the general population. Moreover, the poor living conditions with the lack of basic infrastructure and access to utility services undeniably affect the health of the whole household.

The housing issues of the Roma are part of a broader social exclusion and have far-reaching implications on many aspects of life and possibilities. The substandard settlements are often ghettoized and their inhabitants are stigmatized, which creates a deeper gap between the Roma and non-Roma populations. Urban sociologist Loïc Wacquant defined ghetto as "a special form of collective violence concretized in urban space (...) Urbanization is characterized by asymmetric power rela-

tions between ethnic clusters.”⁹ He explains the function of the ghetto and claims that it has two opposed functions: 1) it is an instrument of ethno-racial control and confinement, 2) can be an integrative and protective space that offers self-organizing and collective protection of the rejected population. Thus ghetto has a function for those inside and for those outside, maintaining the barrier between “us” and “them”. The ghettoization of the Roma settlements can be a useful analytical framework for the observation of the social gap between the Roma and non-Roma populations.

The inhabitants of the deprived Roma settlements often experience stigmatization in society. The stigma related to ethnic identity and gender is reinforced by the stigma related to the place of living. I have encountered this phenomenon in the field. For example, an employed Roma woman hides her address from her co-workers for fear that it would affect their perception.

Sociologist Enikő Vincze researches the ghettoization of the Roma settlements as well as marginalized spaces with the racialized workforce and their productive role in the development of capitalism in Romania.¹⁰ Marginalization in the urban space makes the labor of the inhabitants easily exploited, without investment in their social reproduction. It seems to me that this applies to the context of Serbia. Marginalized and de-

9 Wacquant, L. (2015). „Ghetto”. In: *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (pp. 121-126). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.12233-0>

10 Vincze, E. (2018). „Ghettoization: The Production of Marginal Spaces of Housing and the Reproduction of Racialized Labour”. In: *Racialized Labour in Romania: Spaces of marginality at the periphery of global capitalism*. Springer.

prived spaces in post-socialism become centres in which the workforce is easily exploited. Sometimes in such spaces, we also encounter child labor.

A regional survey about the position of the Roma in the West Balkans was conducted in 2017, and indicators are compared with the non-Roma population.¹¹ Only one-third of the Roma participated in the labor market that year. Participation in the labor market decreased for both groups, Roma, as well as non-Roma, however, the gap between those groups doubled. Only one-third (33%) of the Roma women aged 15-64 participated in the labor market in 2017 while in 2011 that figure was a bit over half (52%). This raises a question about a possible increase in informal labor as well as the issue of increased exploitation. Generally, the racialized workforce is often connected to poor living conditions, hence the problem is very complex and it should be observed holistically. Housing is often connected to other aspects of life and very often to low possibilities for advancement.

What is (not) done?

Housing is always mentioned as one of the key areas for the advancement of the position of the Roma. Professor Vladimir Macura who did extensive research on the Roma settlements, states that during the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, the question of the Roma settlements was at the top of the list of

¹¹ <https://www.undp.org/eurasia/publications/regional-roma-survey-2017-country-fact-sheets>

various initiatives, projects, and meeting points of the international organizations. The Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure as well as international and local non-governmental organizations took part in these meetings. What has been done in this period is insignificant compared to the proportions and complexity of the housing issues of Roma communities. Finally, practical results did not ensue (there were not enough adopted urban plans, legalized houses, newly built housing, repaired houses, sewage and infrastructure improvements and so on). Macura concludes that the non-consistent and unclear housing policy regarding the Roma settlements contributed to poor results.¹² Sometimes the units made of solid materials in the settlements were not mapped at all or registered in the cadastral-topographic plans and are consequently treated as units made of non-durable materials unfit for construction, even though that is not the case.¹³

At this year's public debate on the housing situation,¹⁴ where professor Zlata Vuksanović Macura spoke, I found out that the Decade's action plan called for the construction of over 300 urban plans for Roma settlements over a ten-year period (about 30 per year). So far, up to 2022, between 30 and 40 urban plans have been designed while the slow implementation of the set goals remains one of the core issues.

12 Macura, V. (2017). *Urbanism and Roma Settlements in Serbia*, p.6 <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23944.78081>

13 Ibid, p.50.

14 *How Urban Plans, Laws on Housing and Foreign Investments Affect Housing Situation of the Roma*, online public debate organised by the Roma Forum of Serbia, 27 / 09 / 2022.

The lack of urban planning documentation is an obstacle to the legalization of housing units, even in cases when they are adequate for living. On the one hand, some urban plans have been adopted, while on the other the threats of destruction of Roma settlements and eviction of their inhabitants remain. It seems that evictions and inadequate housing alternatives are a constant threat to Roma communities. The state-judicial apparatus has the power to decide when something will be planned, to allow some informal spaces to survive, and to eliminate others. That being so, we should keep in mind that legalization is not only a technical and bureaucratic question but also a political question.

The citizens should actively participate in the process of urban planning. Nevertheless, their participation is minimized, mostly through “public” consultations on urban plans. This is a general problem on the level of the state, and the participative politics awareness of the citizens is still underdeveloped. Thus, the Roma very rarely have a chance to participate in the design of urban plans, even in the cases when the plans include the elimination of a settlement. Yet, some steps have been made towards a higher level of participation in urban planning within the project EU Support to Roma Inclusion – Strengthening the Local Communities Towards Inclusion of the Roma. A new methodology was developed and is in use since 2018, intending to ensure citizen participation for 11 selected Roma settlements in 11 municipalities in Serbia for which urban plans had to be made.¹⁵ Two important criteria for the municipalities to be a

15 Vuksanović-Macura, Z., & Mišćević, I. (2021). „Excluded communities and participatory urban planning: Experience from informal Roma settlements

part of this program are technical requirements and readiness of the municipalities to co-subsidize the design of urban plans.¹⁶ In the framework of this project, besides international actors, it seems that some of the key motivators for working on the housing questions of the Roma are interest and readiness of the local authorities to put their resources to use.

Currently, a new *National Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia for the 2022-2030 Period* is being implemented. According to this document, more specific measures that concern housing are: Legal registration of the housing units that conform to the basic living standards; Improvement of the standard housing to fulfil basic living standards; Providing utility services infrastructure in standard Roma settlements; Finding a solution to the housing needs of homeless persons, internally displaced persons, and the Roma who have to be displaced.¹⁷ It remains to see how these measures will further concretize and how the city authorities will try to implement them through local action plans. It is well known that at this moment not all the cities have adopted local action plans. According to a survey conducted by the Protector of citizens, the *National Strategy* states a low level of motivation of the local authorities to undertake legal procedures due to the costs that these institutions have to cover as well as the members of Roma communities who cannot afford that.

in Serbia". In: *Environment and Urbanization*, 33(2), 456-477. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09562478211024095>

¹⁶ Ibid, 461.

¹⁷ <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2022/23/1>

As for the role of the civil sector regarding the housing policy for the Roma, it is not big but it is important. The civil sector can point out the specificity of the needs of Roma settlements, it can monitor and analyze the work of the institutions, call for responsibility, and ask for more concrete results. In-depth analysis and adequate policies could further insist on the systemic and socio-political aspects of the problems and on that basis indicate directions for finding solutions. The organizations of the civil society can connect with the organizations that focus their work on housing questions while they also work on improvement of the knowledge about urban planning among Roma communities.

There is also a need for a qualitative change, namely improvement of the existing alternative models (purchase of the countryside houses with big yards, fostering construction with donations of land and construction materials, allocation of the construction materials for finalizing housing units under construction, allocation of the prefabricated houses for individuals or households etc.), as well as the development of new alternative models, as the research on alternative models of social housing suggests.¹⁸ Among those who are the most endangered regarding their housing situation, the research comprises the Roma but also the refugees, internally displaced persons who still live in the collective centres, women victims of violence as well as the population who lives in absolute poverty. An increase in alternative housing solutions and their offer could satisfy the

18 Vuksanović-Macura, Z., & Damjanović, V. M. C. (2016). *Social Housing in Serbia: Alternative Models Available to the Most Endangered Families and Discriminated Women*. Palgo centar. For the models mentioned above see page 73.

specific needs of diverse groups. Besides the diversification of the offers, I think that particular attention should be focused on the availability of housing units as well as on the needs of women, lgbtiq+ population, elderly persons, and persons with disabilities. I believe that the intersection of certain identity categories can make access to adequate housing more difficult for some. As an example, a Roma who is poor, women and a queer person will have more difficulties finding a housing unit than a middle-class, heterosexual Roma man.

Based on this analysis of the housing issues of the Roma, from my perspective, there is a need to develop models directed towards long-term solutions: improvement of the housing units that are already built or are under construction, legal ownership solutions, models of construction of micro-houses with a yard that are energy efficient and therefore more affordable and more flexible in terms of maintenance, models of autonomous construction - where families perform the construction work by themselves on the allocated land, etc. Certainly, the most important remark is that without institutional support and political will, the housing situation of the most vulnerable population can hardly be solved. There should be a consistent dedication, allocation of housing resources and funds from diversified sources (republic budget, local budgets, donations etc.) and the key factor is citizens' participation in the urban planning process as well as in the housing decision-making process, to ensure that the actions will be adapted to their specific needs.

– THE SHADES OF ROMA HOMELESSNESS

It is commonly thought that homelessness is one form of personal defeat and unfortunate circumstances of an individual. Often, we can hear that being homeless is a matter of choice or, simply, that an individual is too lazy to take control over their life. Along these lines, it is very easy to create stereotypes and prejudices that make the word *homeless* synonymous with a negative character. However, homelessness is not a character trait but a situation in which someone may find themselves due to various circumstances. Therefore, the correct expression to use is: a person in the situation of homelessness.

Although the term "situation of homelessness" is mostly used to designate those who do not have any "roof over their head" and are forced to "live" in the street, there are other forms of homelessness. Moreover, homelessness has its ethnicized

and racialized face. In Serbia, there is a whole ethnic group that lives in the situation of homelessness.

„According to Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s classification (1992), there are four situations of homelessness: primary, secondary, tertiary homelessness, and marginally housed persons. Primary homelessness comprehends people without conventional accommodation, those who live on the streets, in parks, under bridges, etc. It is a situation that can be described as rooflessness. Secondary homelessness comprises people who move between various forms of temporary shelter as well as those who live in abandoned buildings, basements, wagons, etc. As opposed to the primarily homeless, these individuals have a ‘roof over their head’ but practically they do not have a home. Tertiary homelessness, or various forms of severe homelessness, designates people who live in collective accommodations such as abandoned military buildings, hotels, schools, hospitals, or migrant and refugee camps. They have a roof over their head and single rooms where they stay but without a private bathroom and kitchen, hence, they live in conditions of limited privacy and comfort. Marginally housed people live in very poor housing situations that are substandard or close to a minimum standard. The last two categories designate inadequate and insecure housing”.¹⁹

So the question arises: in which of the above categories can Roma communities be classified?

„On the territory of the Republic of Serbia, about 40% of the housing units in Roma settlements are made of bad quality materials that are not adequate for construction. In the Auto-

19 Ana Bilinović Rajčić, Jovana Čikić, *Istraživanje beskućništva u Novom Sadu (Research on Homelessness in Novi Sad)*, p. 17.

nomous Province of Vojvodina, this percentage is significantly higher – 63%, though we should keep in mind that this number comprises the houses made of traditional materials which are not necessarily of bad quality. According to the data collected in the 2011 Census, in the Republic of Serbia, there were around 6.300 housing units made of inadequate, poor materials whose householder was a Roma person, which is about 20% of all the households with a Roma householder. The bad housing conditions are further exacerbated by the lack of electrical and other installations, toilets and bathrooms, insufficient number of rooms, and overcrowded housing space. The poor construction quality of the housing units is a huge obstacle in the process of legalization. Also, the procedure for obtaining a construction permit for additional sanitary spaces and/or rooms is very complex, time-consuming, expensive, and identical to the procedure for building a new housing unit. Therefore, those who undertake such construction works, whether they are inhabitants of settlements or some housing aid support program, very rarely try to obtain legal permits. From the perspective of international law and human rights, it is granted that an adequate housing unit should protect from cold, humidity, heat, rain, wind, and other threats to one's health."²⁰

We can see that the Roma not only live in inadequate amenities but that they also inhabit spaces that are not intended for living. Namely, they live in spaces that, in accordance with a certain attained historical-cultural standard, are not apt for dignified human life. Their homelessness is mostly classified

²⁰ The Government of the Republic of Serbia, *The Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia for the 2022-2030 Period*.

in the third and fourth categories. There are also the Roma who are primary and secondary homeless and many of them live on the streets.

Furthermore, even when they find a place where they can survive, such as an informal settlement, the Roma are exposed to a constant fear of forced evictions. Although forced evictions are an increasingly frequent phenomenon that threatens anyone who cannot pay their bills and cover housing costs, so far most frequent victims of the evictions are the members of Roma communities. Just imagine: in this country, it is possible to evict whole communities whenever they do not fit the aesthetics of the environment (like in the Beleville residential area) or are in the way of private capital! Forced evictions are facilitated and designed to side with the capital and not the people while so-called citizen protectors take part in these processes.

„Protector of Citizens has received 14 complaints filed by the Roma and has participated as a mediator in forced evictions of 65 families from the informal settlement *Viadukt* in Resnik, most of which are Roma as well as from the suburban residential area *Rakovica selo*. In the same period, the Protector of Citizens has received 33 complaints for discrimination based on ethnicity, of which 24 were submitted by the Roma and some were collective.”²¹

Because of the lack of clear legal procedure or regulation which would offer concrete solutions for the problems of informal settlements, forced evictions occur without adequate sup-

21 Ibid.

port measures for those who find themselves in such situations.

„According to the research that the Protector of Citizens conducted, the local self-government units consider that they do not have enough expertise for the creation of urban planning documents relative to the evictions of the informal settlements in which the Roma population live. According to more recent research, there is a lack of motivation to start legal procedures because of the related costs that the local self-government units would have to cover together with the members of the Roma community who cannot afford them.”²²

Notably, some of the local self-government units are very much aware of the informal settlement's problem. Nonetheless, it turns out to be completely senseless to start any legal procedure since the situation is hopeless and non-constructive so they further delay finding the solution for these issues. After all, the local self-governments do not have enough financial resources to solve these issues by themselves and state aid is indispensable. Meanwhile, the Roma still inhabit and live in informal settlements. Some of them even build houses, until one day the local authorities decide that informal settlements are exploitable or until the private capital finds its interest in construction projects in those locations.²³ Even though the authorities promise adequate solutions, they are generally never ensured. For instance, the container settlements were offered in some cases as a new housing space, but that did not happen to be a viable housing solution.

22 Ibid.

23 See: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/novi-sad/urbanizacija-velikog-rita-u-delu-novosadskog-naselja-klisa-gradice-se-skole-vrtici/xbr24k9>

Serbia does not have a specific strategy for the prevention and elimination of homelessness. Case in point, even the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia does not contain provisions that clearly state the right to housing. These questions are (partially) treated in the framework of some other strategic documents and laws. The key laws that should regulate the question of homelessness are the Law on Social Protection and the Law on Social Housing. These two laws should help all the citizens of Serbia (as well as those who are not citizens) access their rights. Nevertheless, the current model of social housing is entirely shaped as a neoliberal model and some of the issues it causes are segregation and ghettoization of ethnic minorities and poor communities. What is more, life in the social housing units still involves paying high utility bills that those who come from the poor social strata cannot afford.

„Inclusion of the Roma in social housing programs most often occurs in Belgrade and mostly concerns families that are forcibly evicted from the big informal settlements of *Gazela* and *Belville*. These evictions were the results of big development projects that the European Union financed. Yet, there was not a well thought strategic approach for solving the Roma housing issues through social housing programs that would not be reactive. Further, there are no initiatives directed towards providing adequate housing for individuals and families (seasonal workers and their families) who occasionally come to bigger towns and cities for financial reasons. Also, the existing forms of social housing are not accessible to households with low income, including the Roma. The estimation is that about 5% of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia live in housing units which are public

properties. The number of the Roma who live in the social housing units built in the previous decade is extremely low. This is due to the predefined criteria for accessing this right, which is inaccessible to impoverished families from the Roma ethnic community. In Belgrade, about 90 Roma families that had previously been accommodated in container settlements were moved to city social housing units. Nonetheless, some of these families cannot cover the costs of housing which are too high for their income, so they are under a constant threat of eviction due to the debt. The Roma who are internally displaced persons, mostly accommodated in the collective centres, have easier access to the protected social housing program and make up 7,7% (which is 55 Roma families and 204 individuals) of the social housing users in different towns and cities in the Republic of Serbia. Still, the Roma internal displaced persons who live in informal settlements very rarely receive help from the social housing programs that the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration implements.²⁴

So, although there are certain regulations enshrined in laws, legal measures, and recommendations, they are far from reality and often not implemented in practice. We can say that the persons in the situation of homelessness are left to fend for themselves and their capacities to survive. It looks like the Roma are a collective of homeless who inhabit the abandoned parts of the city while they are waiting to be pushed out or forcibly evicted.

The organizations that work with persons in the situation

24 The Government of the Republic of Serbia, *The Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia for the 2022 -2030 Period*.

of homelessness provide very scarce help given the fact that most of the non-governmental organizations depend on donations and do not have a stable financial income. "Regardless of whether they primarily work on the problems, all the organizations implement activities that aim to help persons in the situation of homelessness / in the risk of homelessness" and the most frequently implemented activities are: "direct and concrete help in form of food, sanitary products, accommodation, clothes, medication, collecting donations and help in form of psychological support to persons in the situation of homelessness / in the risk of homelessness"²⁵ Such forms of support are of a temporary character and do not contribute to an essential change.

In a better world, the local self-governments should develop strategies for fighting homelessness. In this way, it would be possible to clearly define an action plan and strategies for the prevention of the situation of homelessness. The construction of municipal social housing units would provide an opportunity for persons at risk of homelessness to obtain a home. Another solution could be to offer them accommodation in abandoned military buildings, factories, schools, etc. Certainly, the social housing model shouldn't follow a (neo)liberal paradigm; instead, it should be created so that those who need it most can actually access it. By no means would social housing be constructed separately from other housing units, which would contribute to segregation and ghettoization, but true inclusion would be taken into account. Moreover, one of the propos-

25 Ana Bilinović Rajičić, Jovana Čikić, *Istraživanje beskućništva u Novom Sadu (Research on Homelessness in Novi Sad)*, p. 44.

als to the state could be to require each investor to "spare" at least one housing unit in every newly erected building, which would then be allocated as social housing aid. Also, all the local self-government units should subsidize housing costs and utility bills and donate monthly financial aid equivalent to an amount necessary for survival.

„Housing First model does not see the solution to housing issue as a unique and ultimate response to homelessness. This model is followed by a series of other services that are available to those who receive housing aid intended for the homeless (i.e. health-care services, social care services, employment centres' services, etc). This is a so-called consumer-driven model which recognizes different paths of homelessness and therefore does not imply a universal solution to it. For that reason, the homeless are offered the possibility to use diverse services in ways that they estimate to be the most appropriate for their benefit. At the same time, such an approach makes the right to housing equally important and compatible with the right to choose.“²⁶

Such solutions are not impossible in a state that genuinely performs a function of social welfare and truly exists for the benefit of its citizens. Nonetheless, we live in the capitalist system where the phenomenon of homelessness is considered to be some form of weakness, the individuals are blamed and even punished and criminalized for their helplessness. All of this only further intensifies the difficult position of those persons.

It seems that the proverb "only we can save ourselves" is the only guideline for further action since solidarity and unity can

26 Ana Bilinović Rajičić, Jovana Čikić, (*Beskućništvo: teorija, prevencija, intervencija*) *Homelessness: theory, prevention, intervention*, p. 121.

overcome the most difficult life obstacles. Maybe the best examples are the collectives and organizations that participate in the common struggle for the right to housing, namely the Joint Action *Roof Over Your Head*: "We think that the right to a home is a fundamental human right and we strongly believe that absolutely every individual deserves a roof over their head."²⁷ Along those lines, maybe the Roma should not wait for another forced eviction, but to self-organize and horizontally connect with other progressive movements and organizations, and demand secured housing that is a basis for a dignified living.

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²⁷ See the web-page: <https://zakrovnadglavom.org/o-nama/>

– ROMA COMMUNITY IN NIŠ (AGAIN) WITHOUT ELECTRICITY

The inhabitants of the Roma settlement *12 Februar* in Niš live without electricity for more than 6 months. Regardless of the protests of the inhabitants and Roma activists in front of the City Hall in Niš and the Ministry of Mining and Energy in Belgrade, 24 Roma households still live in darkness. The situation persists despite the clearly expressed will of the inhabitants of the settlement to collaborate with the institutions and find a common solution to pay the debt that is imposed.

The inhabitants of this settlement affirm that their problems with electricity supply extend over decades but that the institutions in charge never showed understanding thus all their initiatives were predestined to fail.

How this problem with the electricity supply started

The settlement *12 Februar* was created in Niš in 1945 when the Roma moved into the barracks that the *Mašinska Industrija*

Niš, a machine factory from Niš had built for the workers who came from other places. The inhabitants obtained contracts for temporary accommodation and with time their number grew so today over a hundred people live there.²⁸

The example of the creation of the settlement *12 Februar* is paradigmatic for almost all the big Roma settlements that still exist on the territory of Serbia. According to the official data, the total number of these settlements is 702.²⁹ In most cases, these settlements were created after the Second World War when the Roma populated public areas or, as was the case with the above-mentioned settlement when they "temporarily" inhabited public buildings that were no longer in use. Since the society was more open to the integration of the Roma citizens during socialism, the state showed more understanding and support or at least tolerated these acts of settling.

As the number of inhabitants grew, Roma settlements grew in size and now are considerably bigger than at the time of their creation. It is important to say that many Roma settlements accepted a large number of refugees during the wars in the 1990s, so their population and size significantly grew in this period.

After the 1990s, major changes occurred in the social system, namely the shift from public to private. This cut between socialism and the restoration of capitalism brought about a drastic change in the attitude towards the Roma citizens who lived in the settlements. Most of the public properties in the

28 <https://romaworld.rs/da-li-i-kada-cemo-raseliti-ljude-iz-naselja-jevresko-groblje-i-crvena-zvezda/>

29 *Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia for 2022-2030 Period*. Available at: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2022/23/1>

cities were sold to private investors while the public space that numerous Roma settlements used to occupy became private or under a legal dispute.

Consequentially, the Roma inhabitants of the settlements mostly do not own legally the land and houses in which they live, while the documents in their possession are discarded as outdated. The institutions consider this fact to be an insurmountable obstacle and thus is used as a main excuse for the lack of electricity supply in Roma settlements, which simultaneously serves as a "reason" for doing nothing. The unresolved situation with the documents, paperwork, and legal ownership rights is abused when the Roma inhabitants of settlements cannot obtain access to the electricity grid without a proof of ownership for the housing units that need the access.

It is crucial to indicate that the members of Roma communities mostly populated certain territories in groups and that those settlements are most often confined with clear borders or segregated from the rest of the population. This is why the Roma are often perceived as a group of people and not as individual members of society, as is the case with other citizens. Therefore, the whole settlement is punished for a problem caused by individuals who live there. Certainly, this is just one of the mechanisms of implementation of racialized politics and of oppression of a certain group of people that is also spatially established.

This is an important factor for the question of the electricity supply of Roma settlements, because often, due to ownership issues, several users are connected to one electric connector, sometimes even several dozen. In such situations, if a problem

occurs or one user steals the electric energy, all of the users will be disconnected from the grid. This approach can leave several tens of families without electricity by the fault of one individual.

All of the above proves that the state does not care about solving basic legal, ownership, housing, and infrastructural issues of those who under the circumstances inhabited such spaces for decades and did not have other choices.

Life without electricity as an image of the government's treatment of Roma

Despite the above-mentioned difficulties to ensure a regular power supply of Roma settlement households, there are no valid reasons to deprive a large group of people of something that is a modern achievement of the society and considered a basic condition for a life in dignity. A society that allows for 24 households *to live without electricity for over 6 months* cannot be considered democratic or a serious one.

The Roma settlement *12 Februar* in Niš was disconnected from the electricity grid in 2014 for the first time and many times afterward its inhabitants were left without electricity. Even though the inhabitants made numerous attempts to begin tackling the issues in their community, they were constantly met with closed doors, inadequate answers, and only short-term solutions. This year, their existential problems culminated when the whole settlement was disconnected from the electricity grid due to the accusations that some individuals did not have permission to use the electrical power.

In their efforts to have light in their homes again, the inhabitants received significant support from the activists members of the movement *Opre Roma Serbia*. Regarding the issues of the settlement in Niš, the activist Jelena Reljić says:

"The inhabitants of this settlement have had issues with the electricity supply for over 10 years. Constantly, the electricity is disconnected and again reconnected right before the elections. The same thing happened this time. They were disconnected from the grid and reconnected before the elections. When the elections were finished, the electricity was disconnected and up to now they still do not have electricity. They were used many times and blackmailed on the account of basic human needs. Obviously, no one wants to help them. There are only excuses and pretexts. In the name of those people, someone has signed a reprogramming policy for the debt dating from the 1970s without them knowing about it. They have been told that they have to pay lump sum costs and the bills were sent for only one month. Also, they have been told that one of the residents was caught stealing electricity. Be that as it may, no long-term solution was offered and the above-stated reasons are not enough to disconnect the whole settlement from the electricity grid. The institutions do not react, from the mayor of Niš to the Ministry of Mining and Energy (...) We do not care anymore which political party is in power, because the problem is within the system."³⁰

Although the case of the settlement *12 Februar* in Niš came to the focus of the media thanks to the efforts and persistence of the *Opre Roma* activists, this is not the only case of the settlement

³⁰ The conversation with the activist Jelena Reljić was conducted by telephone.

with such problems. It is not rare that large groups of Roma citizens are disconnected from the electricity grid. Just a few years ago, *Crvena Zvezda*, one of the largest Roma settlements in Niš, went without electricity for more than six months. As neither local nor state authorities showed initiatives to solve this issue, the Roma residents of this settlement were again connected to the electricity grid because of the decision of the European Human Rights Court from Strasbourg. Even in this situation, the state did nothing and has still failed to provide a long-term solution for the people living in the *Crvena Zvezda* settlement, who, due to the Strasbourg Court, still have electricity today.

Regarding the fact that the residents of most of the Roma settlements do not have documents to prove legal ownership of the land and houses where they live, it can be expected that many Roma will face a similar scenario in their struggle for fundamental preconditions for a life in dignity.

One of the solutions for Roma settlements inhabitants would be to adopt amendments and changes to the law that would eliminate the provision that states that only legalized housing units can be connected to the electricity grid and which the Constitutional Court declared non-constitutional. Nevertheless, even if this provision is eliminated, a majority of the Roma will not be able to apply for legalization due to a series of bureaucratic problems, such as a lack of personal documents and formal residency. This indicates that a more complex approach to this problem – and above all, a political will – is needed, non of which are currently existent in Serbia.

The issue of the power cuts in the Roma settlements points to much more serious problems in the society, such as a selec-

tive application of the law that is valid only for the poor and denial of the rights to those who seemingly never were supposed to have access to them. It also indicates a bureaucratization of existential problems which in any democratic society should be priorities. Furthermore, it shows an increase in intolerance towards the Roma and a lack of care for the poor, and the fact that the fight for a life of dignity for all people has yet to begin.. While we will fight for suitable and comfortable housing for everyone in areas with access to electricity, water, and other essential infrastructures, one of the key goals of this struggle will undoubtedly be the elimination of Roma settlements as racially and ethnically segregated areas.

– **WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE ROMA WHO LIVE ON THE RIM OF THE BOR MINE**

Chinese company Zijin – one of the major foreign investments in Serbia – has found several hundreds of households in the outskirts of the Bor copper ore mining and smelting basin. Although these illegally inhabited housing units have existed here for a long time, and have provided a roof over the heads of the most marginalized and impoverished members of the society, their question was not solved even after the Chinese company took over the property of the basin. We can say that these people, namely, their homes, have been practically bought together with the mining and smelting complex.

Among these illegal households, there are about three hundred Roma households. The number of the Roma in Bor is not insignificant, because during the Second World War, numerous members of the Roma community had been forcibly

brought to the concentration camps in this area where many remained after the war.

The barracks were originally built for the miners and now, after almost one century, the members of Roma communities live in them. With their families, they inhabit the ramshackle houses, in the part of the town that was expelled from the urban plan. A typical Roma family lives in 23 square meters, without water, sewage system, and electricity. The Roma managed to improve their families' living situations as best they could within these inadequate housing facilities. Some worked abroad, collected money, and upgraded their homes in the barracks. Some people collect raw materials for a living, while others manage in different ways. The settlements where the Roma live are, above all, illegal and the city has been neglecting this issue for decades. The authorities have not provided a solution for the legal status of the barracks on the edge of the mining complex. In a sense, people were left to fend for themselves, to live in more and more dilapidated barracks precisely because the town authorities did not have an adequate solution for these homeless persons.³¹

Due to the bad housing conditions experienced by the majority of Serbian population, the housing problems affecting Roma communities are not as surprising. Hence, almost anyone can easily end up in a situation of homelessness. It seems

31 Homelessness is not defined only as primary homelessness situation, as it is the case with those who are forced to sleep in the street. There are also secondary, tertiary and other types of homelessness. The homeless persons who inhabit these barracks do not have legal ownership or rent permits for the roof over their head and can lose their temporary housing at any point. Hence they are in the category of secondary homelessness and run the risk of being forced to live in the streets and find themselves in the situation of the primary homelessness.

that we live in a state in which the law of the strongest prevails because the whole system is designed to protect the strongest. As for housing, there are laws that benefit those who are financially powerful. For others, there is a high risk of forced evictions, the measure that is used in particular against those who are marginalized. The entire Roma communities have experienced forced evictions in the past decades, without adequate and long-term housing solutions. In practice, this means that if a citizen owes money to the state or a bank, they risk losing their home, which will be confiscated by court and private enforcement agents. The whole system, legislation included, is designed to position the state against its citizens. An average citizen of Serbia cannot bear the financial costs of housing, which are constantly on the rise. Thus, the Roma who are impoverished are in an even worse position when they have to cover bills and other housing-related costs. The Republic of Serbia holds the first place in Europe according to housing unavailability, yet the housing and living costs are only increasing.

It is therefore understandable that the poverty-stricken members of Roma communities found a partial solution to their housing issues in the dilapidated barracks on the edge of the mine.

Since the 1990s, these housing units have represented a danger because they are old and fragile, so they do not correspond to the standards of adequate housing. City utility service workers enter this area very rarely because the residents of the barracks are not treated as equal citizens. Sometimes, it happens that the emergency medical service does not come at all. The utility services only visit after repeated requests of Roma non-govern-

mental organizations, once a year or less. Tall poplar trees surround the settlement, and due to humidity and underground water in the area they reach over 10 meters in height. During the winter and bad weather periods, the branches freeze and dry, becoming a danger for the residents who pass frequently underneath them, yet the utility service did not react regardless of frequent requests. The branches did break and fall several times, and it was just a matter of sheer luck that no one was hurt. There is no light in the settlement, thus the residents use flashlights to move around in the dark, even when they bring their children back from home. Stray dogs are another major issue, they are not sterilized or microchipped and often attack and bite children and adults. These events sometimes result in legal cases against the city, which then pays an indemnity but the problem remains without a solution. In summer, the residents of these barracks struggle with rats and snakes, and in winter with the snow and cold because the barracks are in very poor conditions, with damaged roofs, and without insulation.

The members of Roma communities who live on the edge of the mining basin generally have a very low level of education and a very high unemployment rate, which additionally reinforces their vulnerable position. This leaves space for the authorities to control these citizens at their will. The majority of the Roma depend on social allowances, and this fact is often used to threaten them. So, Roma communities are affected by poverty on one side, and on the other, they are under the pressure from the authorities to remain in this position.

Additionally, Roma and other nearby residents are far more negatively impacted by the mine's emissions than other resi-

dents of Bor are. They are more often compelled to use polluting materials that are harmful to the environment. This leads to the occurrence of environmental racism. The Roma are often blamed because of their class status which forces them to live in substandard settlements that the city services neglect. Moreover, the focus shifts from the main polluters to Roma citizens. The authorities and the majority population usually blame them for the wild landfills that surround the settlement, as well as for the use of low-quality heating systems and dangerous heating components.

Although the state is responsible for poor waste management and the lack of a sewage system, it shifts the focus in this way. Central heating is generally unattainable for the Roma and it is a privilege of those who are financially well off. The Roma who live on the mine edge are at the front line of pollution, they are exposed to constant mining by-products and cancerogenic air-borne particles. Nonetheless, this fact is openly denied or overlooked even though it should lead to a conclusion that energy poverty is keeping the Roma in the state in which they live.

Besides housing, legal and ecological difficulties, people who survive in such hard conditions are exposed to an increased risk of mental health issues: depression, the feeling of uncertainty, fear, the feeling of abandonment, and general despair. All these factors combined lead to serious consequences that impact the quality of life of the Roma. It is therefore not surprising that their life expectancy barely reaches 60.

The key question is: What will happen to the Roma who illegally reside in the barracks on the mining basin outskirts? Will the company and the local authorities leave them to

struggle to survive in already tragic conditions or will they be forcibly evicted? Is there an adequate housing solution for those people?

Possible solutions for the housing question of the Roma in Bor

It seems that there are no positive solutions and possibilities for the destitute Roma. Since they are in the marginalized social group and the lowest socio-economic class in Serbia, they face a major risk of easily losing even their low-quality dwellings that they currently have. So far, forced evictions have turned out to be one of the harshest strategies the state has used to move away people out of a certain area.

An example of this kind of action is the government's use of excavators and buses to forcibly evict Roma residents of Belgrade and the surrounding areas, moving them into inadequate housing containers where they still reside today. Such solutions should in no case be used because every human being has the right to a roof over their head and life in dignity.

One of the potential housing solutions is social housing. The state can take care of its citizens by implementing a social housing program, but it should first improve the program with new provisions and make it sustainable so that the users do not end up in their previous position and fall into the risk of living on the street. The city of Bor does not have social housing, but it does have a huge number of abandoned housing units and buildings that might be renovated and adapted for the pur-

pose of providing social housing. In this way, the city could also avoid segregation of the Roma in separated settlements.

Furthermore, the city could allocate housing in the villages with adequate subventions to the Roma who currently live on the rim of the mine. With adapted programs, the city could support the Roma to found farming households in which they could cultivate local produce for themselves as well as for sale. In this way, they would become independent and potentially more financially stable, while the city would additionally resolve the issue of the disappearing rural households.

To demonstrate that there is no discrimination of the workforce based on ethnicity, the state could lobby for the Chinese company to hire equally the Roma and non-Roma workers. While those who are qualified for such work can be employed, those with low qualification levels could attend training and professional qualification courses.

The Roma in Serbia mostly live in inhumane substandard settlements. Yet those who live on the rim of the Bor mining basin might be in an even more vulnerable position. Their status is very insecure because no one knows what the Chinese company could request regarding the illegal residents of the barracks. They are exposed to the highest concentration of pollution which puts their lives in danger, and the situation worsens by the day.

Silence and pushing the problem under the rug have been going on for more than a century. Yet, they can be broken by the multitude of alternatives, some of which are outlined in this article. The solution is not unreachable, it is possible. Instead of adopting countless new laws and action plans, the state and

local authorities should use the means and tools that they have at their disposal to help those people. Whether there is a desire to do so, that is the question...

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– **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SCHOOL IS NOT MANDATORY?**

Roma children's representation in the education system in Serbia

According to the 2002 Census, in the Republic of Serbia, 108.193 citizens declared as members of the Roma ethnic minority and in the 2011 Census their number grew to 147.604. However, the overall Roma population in Serbia is estimated to be much higher, between 250.000 and 500.000. The 2022 census is currently being processed so the data is not available yet. From the 2011 Census data, we can see that 34.2% of the Roma did not complete elementary school. Only 33.3% completed elementary school, 11.5% have completed high school and 1% has a higher education or university degree. The data show that only one-half of Roma children that enroll in elementary school reach the fifth grade, they usually drop out of school at the age of 11 and the majority of those who discontinue education are girls. Also, as time passes, we can see an increase in the number of educated Roma.

The data on high school attendance from 2014 reveal that only 20% of the children of the corresponding age attend high school. This figure is very low in comparison with the general population where 84% percent of children attend high school.

A very small number of young Roma enroll in high education institutions and universities. Only 0.9% of young Roma attend tertiary education and they usually start at a later age compared to other students because they have more issues with entrance exams. Very few young Roma obtain high education degrees, mostly those from rich families, who are integrated in society. Still, thanks to the scholarships provided by diverse organizations, the number of young Roma who completes high school education and college degrees is increasing.

This shows that the education system cannot provide education for all children and that it does not have efficient mechanisms to keep pupils and students within the system and allow them to exercise their right to education.

Which high schools do Roma youth enroll in?

The Roma who continue their education after elementary school, mostly enroll in professional high schools that do not require entrance exams and usually last 2 or 3 years. A very low number of Roma children enroll in grammar schools and high schools that have better ratings and offer a better educational base for further education and employment.

The 2009 survey of the Centre for Applied European Studies states that about 500 Roma pupils have enrolled in high schools

thanks to the Measure of affirmative action for the Roma in Serbia. Nonetheless, this is still a very small number compared to the overall estimated Roma population.

School dropout of Roma children

The Strategy for the Development of Education in Serbia 2012 has set an aim to reduce the early dropout rate from schools below 5% by 2020. In 2015, the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia stated that 8.3% of pupils dropped out of school early. Nevertheless, before making a conclusion regarding dropout, we should analyze the dropout rate in elementary schools, coverage of elementary and secondary education, and dropout rate in secondary schools. The net enrollment rate in secondary schools in 2005 was 76% and in 2011/2012 it grew to 90.4%. However, it is important to know that the rate of graduation from secondary school is 86.5% in Serbia, and secondary school coverage is 87.5% according to the data of the Statistical Office from 2013. The elementary school graduation rate in Serbia is generally high. Yet if we compare the percentage of the children from the general population (93.4%) and the percentage of the children from socially vulnerable groups, in particular from Roma settlements where 64% of children graduate from elementary school, we can notice a huge disparity.

The situation in secondary schools is even less positive if we observe the data from 2014 according to which only 22% of adolescents from Roma settlements attend secondary school and the percentage of Roma girls is lower than 15.

According to the data of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development, the highest dropout rate is from 1st to 3rd grade (at the age of 7 to 9) – 22.5%, and between 7th and 8th grade (at the age of 14-15) – 2.1%.

The reasons for non-enrollment / dropout from secondary school

There are numerous reasons why Roma children do not enroll in high school, as well as the reasons why those who enroll drop out. Roma children in the Republic of Serbia are often excluded from the general society, they are marginalized and stigmatized.

Due to the living conditions, in Roma communities, it is expected that the individuals grow up and start a family early, often before they complete elementary school. The number of non-educated women is significantly higher than the number of non-educated men in the Roma population. Some of the reasons include the perception of the un/importance of education for women, their position and family role, gender norms that do not encourage them to get an education, and lack of broader support for girls to continue their education. All of those reasons derive from the imperative to grow up early and get married as a way to survive. Roma girls enter early marriages more often, hence they drop out of school because of their marital and family duties. Consequently, they do not have a profession or employment and thus fall into a vicious circle of poverty. They do not have the necessary conditions to continue their

education because of housework and care for family members before and during the marriage.

The surveys reveal that the percentage of children who attend school increases with the education level of the mother. 95% of children whose mothers have high school or university degrees attend school. These findings can be explained by the financial status of the families whose mothers have higher levels of education since we can suppose that the children from those families have better real living conditions (adequate housing, water, electricity, heating, accessible school, necessary school supplies) thus they have more opportunities to continue their education. The data is indicative and implies that the improvement of living conditions can result in an increase in the education rates of Roma children who would then be able to provide their children with better living conditions and education.

It is considered that 70% of Roma children in Serbia are impoverished. Poverty affects school dropout in many ways. Lack of money for necessary school supplies, books, food, and often for the travel to school certainly is one of the major causes of dropout or non-enrollment in secondary school.

Financial marginalization also concerns affiliation to certain professions, exclusion from formal employment, and vulnerable financial position of the Roma, all of which consequentially affects their positions and decisions regarding education. The Roma generally have jobs that require skills obtained through experience and not through formal education. Most often they are workers without profession. As the bad financial situation continually repeats, prevailing ideal of productivity over education developed among Roma population. Therefore, it is not

a surprise that parents consider that the children should learn practical skills in school which would help them overcome the poverty circle. They do not recognize the purpose of education and profession that prolong the time spent in school but also potentially lead to jobs that would be better paid, easier, and more respected in society.

Spatial marginalization relates to life in ghettoized, segregated, and marginalized communities, which has an impact on how long schooling is pursued. Children need to use public transportation to travel to secondary school or be accompanied by their parents, who are often unable to afford to do so because Roma settlements are most typically isolated from other residential areas and situated on the outskirts. Hostile environment in school often is a factor that contributes to early school dropout. Roma children leave the education system due to the stereotypes and prejudices, as well as difficulties that they encounter among their peers because of their physical appearance and cultural specificities (customs and attitudes). Although none of the ethnic groups in Serbia (Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats, Albanians) ever had a war conflict with the Roma, their ethnic group is exceedingly unpopular among the school children, as the research conducted by Mihić, Varga, Surla & Karan (2016) reveals. The research analyzes the attitudes and prejudices of the children of elementary school and secondary school age towards the Roma population. If we add the extremely low social status of the majority of the Roma, the position towards their ethnic group is further extremized.

Due to the lack of programs adapted for work with Roma children that could facilitate the learning process, and to irreg-

ularity or insufficient number of additional classes, the teachers often do not manage to complete the teaching program with Roma children. Knowing that Roma children cannot achieve an equal level of knowledge in such conditions, the teachers lower the evaluation criteria to motivate the children and keep them in school. In that way, Roma children obtain the elementary school certificate but their level of knowledge is low and insufficient for enrollment in high schools that last for four years. The education system often sees the solution in the inclusion of Roma children in special education schools and schools for the education of adults, even though there is no justified reason for such a measure.

Parents put less effort into their kids' education, therefore children make slower progress. And it's possible that children end up with teachers who are less qualified. The lack of collaboration between the teaching and pedagogical staff is another important risk factor for school dropout. Children's school results also depend on their parents' attitude towards their school work, parents' follow-up of children's progress, parents' help with homework, upbringing, education level of parents, type of education of parents, family structure, parents' opinions, conditions in which children spend their free time, parents' level of information regarding changes of the education system and many other factors. Some other factors affect as well children's school results: disintegrated or incomplete family, number of children, family atmosphere, parents' opinions, unacceptable differences in the upbringing of boys and girls, child neglect, addictions, loss of child's affection, unreal expectations from a child, overprotection or complete rejection, exaggerated and

non-selective exposure to television programs, parents' mistakes in the upbringing, authoritarian educational style.

What happens to Roma children when they leave school

Studies show that those who interrupt their education before graduating from high school have more difficulties finding employment and are more prone to social exclusion. After dropping out of school, a large number of Roma children end up unjustifiably in institutions for special education, which lowers their already meagre chances of getting an education.

Model for prevention of dropout

The main component of the proposed model (2016) was the system for early identification of students at the risk of dropout and intervention. Furthermore, it contained measures for parents' inclusion in school, measures for peer support, teacher training, and new school models of additional classes. This model was based on many factors that contribute to dropout but it also made sure that the implementation does not entail additional costs. The above-mentioned model for additional classes refers to the strengthening of ethos within the school through horizontal exchange among teachers, where each school adapts the general guidelines to their local context. Peer support

was described as cognitive and emotional, and as such, it would advance the values of acceptance and equality within school. Parents' inclusion implies the creation of a network of parents who will together promote and foster values such as solidarity, mutual support, and aid. Trained teachers should be carriers of these activities and processes. The system for early identification and intervention implements individual plans for the prevention of dropout among students who are estimated to be at risk. The identification of students is based on a tool designed for classroom teachers who evaluate the level of impact each risk factor for dropout has on students. The risk factors measured in such a way are: socioeconomic status, absenteeism, achievements, problematic behaviour, access to social allowance, and other factors such as adolescent pregnancy and psychoactive substances abuse. The dropout risk index can range from 0 to 100, and socio-economic status is considered to be the most important risk factor for dropout. This index can be calculated and differs for elementary school and secondary school students.

Supportive measures for high school enrollment and graduation

In the field of pedagogical and consultant work, it is important to promote the potential of the education system among children and their parents as well as to actively support parents' development of their competences. It is necessary to help

create conditions in which parents of Roma children can adequately perform their role, which mainly refers to upbringing, education, and preparation for adult life. The support is given in situations of crisis when the family is reinforced in its everyday functioning and children's growth and progress in difficult conditions are fostered. The support that Roma children obtain within their community is crucial for the advancement of their health, educational, economic, and social perspective.

It is important to include the findings of the above-mentioned research (Mihić and al. 2016) which state that the contact between children in elementary school (which is mandatory for all children) is reduced to necessary contact between Roma and non-Roma children in school. Still, that contact is formal, without need or request for interaction with the members of the Roma ethnic group, without an idea about overcoming cultural differences and socialization of Roma and non-Roma children, and especially, without any idea about understanding differences and acceptance of school peers although they are different. Contrary to the expectation that increased contact with a group results in a decrease in prejudices and the creation of a positive image, it is the absence of contact with the Roma population that results in a slightly more positive image (both with boys and girls) towards Roma in general. We can understand this as a neutral attitude towards an unknown ethnic group with which children do not have genuine and adequate contact, and, by all accounts, they do not even want to establish it. Therefore, one should be careful when encouraging mere formal contact with Roma children; it seems more crucial to work on a true connection between the differences,

to develop pluralistic solidarity-based collectives and approach stereotypes and prejudices which can appear among non-Roma children as well as among their parents. In this direction, it is beneficial to foster activities intended to intensify the collaboration between non-Roma and Roma children, such as peer support and similar forms of horizontal knowledge exchange.

The support programs should help girls to stay in school in this critical period, it should provide social and economic alternatives to early marriage and parenthood and support to the girls who are already married. It is necessary to create conditions for every Roma child (including Roma girls) to complete elementary school education and, if it is possible, high school education. These conditions should include free books, transportation to and from school, creation of an inclusive environment through the measures of cultural affirmation and support of diversity. We cannot insist on the continuity of Roma girls' education if the changes do not occur in all the other spheres of their lives.

Another potential solution is the education of adults. It has been neglected in Serbia and is scarcely used in the formal education system. The idea of lifelong education as well as the need for additional qualification training and to acquire new qualifications have conditioned the adoption of the *Strategy for Development of Adult Education in the Republic of Serbia* as early as in 2006. The number of the Roma who participate in adult education is very small, regarding the number of the illiterate. The Roma have an exceptional need for literacy and professional qualifications. Education programs could help adults to obtain a minimum of knowledge necessary for in-

clusion in the work sphere. A significant number of the Roma who go to adult education schools are younger than 15 (which means that they should go to regular schools instead). Based on many reports, the Roma make up 70% to 90% of the total number of students in schools for adult education. Although these schools are important as an alternative and solution for incomplete education, it is important to react in time and educate children in a regular manner. Moreover, when children are excluded from the regular school program and sent to special education schools or adult education schools could have more negative consequences than benefits for children because the marginalization escalates.

Conclusion

The vicious circle of poverty of the Roma is reinforced by the lack of education. It is considered that good quality education and equality in education could be an opportunity to avoid multigenerational poverty and life on the margins of society. The very beginning of the education problem can be perceived in the position of Roma children in preschool institutions, which determines their further position and achievements in school. The factors that result in a small number of Roma children in preschool institutions do not differ much from the factors that affect absence from elementary and secondary school. Enrollment in and graduation from secondary school for Roma children is a culturally conditioned process to a higher extent than enrollment of elementary school. The culture has an important

impact on secondary school attendance, besides a poor socio-economic status, life in segregated settlements, lack of necessary school supplies, and discrimination that Roma children face in schools. Poverty imposes early marriages to the Roma as well as the other nationalities as a way to overcome that situation and solve economic issues. Furthermore, these marriages and the related obligations towards home and family can affect Roma children's opportunities to attend secondary school. Fundamental changes are needed to solve this issue, although it's debatable whether doing so is warranted.

The aspects that should be gradually developed are children's awareness of the importance of education, help that they can obtain for schooling, ways to perform family roles but also to fulfil personal ambitions, reproductive health, and respect for personal desires and needs. Furthermore, the economic stability of the Roma (adequate living conditions, stable and well-paid jobs) would eliminate marriage as a way to escape poverty and consequentially more children would be motivated to continue their schooling. It is important to respect Roma children's culture and tradition, the support that they should obtain should regard their education and free choice of their future. Regular attendance of preschool and elementary school education, together with regular collaboration with parents, would create good foundations for secondary school enrollment. An important part of this process is working with parents and educating them about the importance on continuity of education through secondary school as well as the advantages that their child would obtain with profession and qualification. Like in other areas, the prevention of school dropout of Roma

children requires a collaboration of pedagogical and teaching staff in schools, parents, and pupils. Schools should encourage further contact between Roma and non-Roma children which would not be superficial and imposed. The climate in mixed schools should enable conditions in which Roma and non-Roma children collaborate, learn from and support each-other. The activities that the school can offer are lessons on different cultures, joint activities, presentations of differences and ways to overcome them from children's perspective (such as cinema visits, school plays, reading about different cultures, learning other languages). These activities would provide the necessary structural conditions for establishing a non-superficial contact. Equal education for all, request to acquire all the necessary knowledge for high school enrollment, and use of special forms of education only when it is necessary, would encourage children to study and continue their education. The measures that the state institutions could implement, as well as material benefits, professional support, and follow up, could greatly contribute to easier and long-lasting changes. Job positions accessible for all, monitoring and eradication of discrimination at workplace as well as decent salaries, would increase motivation of Roma children to attend formal education and support of their parents.

The above-mentioned model or some future models could provide highly important prevention which can identify children at risk. A timely implementation would give better results and help to map causes of the risk of early dropout that could then be properly addressed.

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– **STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION OF THE ROMA IN THE TERRITORY OF THE CITY OF BELGRADE FOR THE 2022-2032 PERIOD: NEW HOPE FOR OLD PROBLEMS?**

*The Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Territory of the City of Belgrade for the 2020-2032 Period*³² is based on the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia for the 2016-2025 Period*. The Strategy covers the period from 2016 to 2025 and was adopted by the government of Serbia. At the beginning of February 2022, the government also adopted the *Revised Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia for the 2020-2030 Period*.

The Strategy adopted at the level of the city of Belgrade is the first document of the public policy in the area of social in-

32 *Strategija za socijalno uključivanje Roma i Romkinja na teritoriji grada Beograda za period 2022-2032 (The Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Territory of the City of Belgrade for the 2020-2032 Period)*. https://www.beograd.rs/images/data/95cd2314474f1158ec44d4fc9127a24e_2295688925.pdf (last access on 19/11/2022)

clusion of the Roma on the territory of the city of Belgrade. This document is closely linked with relevant international documents such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, *European Social Charter* as well as the *Strasbourg Declaration on Roma*.

The main concept of the Strategy is all-encompassing and attempts to cover the crucial issues of Roma communities. It covers eight priority areas: 1) fight against Ciganism; 2) poverty and social exclusion; 3) participation; 4) education; 5) housing; 6) employment; 7) health; 8) social protection. The city of Belgrade has 17 municipalities that are participating in the planning system, and coordinators for Roma questions are positioned in six municipalities of Belgrade – Barajevo, Čukarica, Obrenovac, Palilula, Surčin and Zvezdara. The coordinators are extremely important for the Roma community in the municipalities where they work. Besides Roma coordinators, pedagogical assistants have a vital role in finding solutions for the issues of Roma communities. On the territory of the city of Belgrade about 40 pedagogical assistants were employed. Health mediators, who act as a vital link in the effective relationship between the Roma community's residents and the healthcare system, play an equally significant role. This work is already meant for women, which is undoubtedly not a suitable option since men are equally capable of performing the same task.

It is interesting to mention that only two Belgrade municipalities, Čukarica and Zvezdara, have local mechanisms

for full integration of the Roma, with four key components: 1) coordinator for Roma questions; 2) mobile unit/team; 3) pedagogical assistants; 4) healthcare mediators. These municipalities have institutional and financial capacities for efficient implementation of full integration of the Roma. Nevertheless, the existing results are not on a desirable level and that fact does not install hope.

The Strategy provides an increase in the percentage of Roma children who graduate from elementary and secondary school, as well as an advancement of the work of adult education schools whose results so far have been very good. Since education is a very sensitive social area, especially for marginalized communities, the Strategy underlines a normative framework that regulates this area. Hence, it specifies that the *Law on Pre-school Education* and the *Law on Local Self-Governments* stipulate financing of preschool education while the financing of elementary and secondary schools on the territory of the city of Belgrade is stipulated by the *Law on the Fundamentals of Education System*. General conclusions regarding education are 1) only three city municipalities allocated funds for the purchase of school books, namely Čukarica, Grocka and Mladenovac, while only the municipality of Mladenovac allocated this fund fully to children of Roma ethnicity; 2) when it comes to transportation of pupils, only nine municipalities filed reports on financing transportation for elementary school children but only the municipality of Mladenovac allocated this fund fully to the Roma children; 3) none of the municipalities covers transportation costs for secondary school pupils. Furthermore, regarding scholarships, the municipality of Mladenovac stands

out again as it keeps a record of allocated scholarships to Roma secondary school pupils. As for the university scholarships for Roma students, only two municipalities stand out, Mladenovac and Čukarica.

Regarding unemployment on the territory of the city of Belgrade, 1.576 Roma citizens are registered as unemployed by the National Employment Service. However, the unemployed Roma express great interest in the development of entrepreneurial activities and subsidized employment. The Strategy maps the key problems regarding the solution to unemployment of the members of the Roma community, such as 1) low level of education; 2) lack of qualification and competencies which are necessary for the local labor market, including a low level of computer literacy; 3) lack of will to enter the employment field; 4) lack of financial social allowances; 5) difficulty in finding guarantors is a major obstacle for larger participation of the unemployed Roma in the programs for incitement and development of entrepreneurship; 6) low level of education and qualifications; 7) low ratio of employed Roma in the overall number of public sector employees.

The Strategy attempts to overcome all of these issues in an ambitious way and for that reason the city of Belgrade has formed the Local Employment Committee which gives opinions and recommendations to the local self-government unit in charge regarding the implementation of employment program, program and measures of active employment policy, employment legislation as well as other questions related to employment. The Center for Social Entrepreneurship of the City of Belgrade is an important resource for Roma commu-

nity inclusion in the sphere of employment, but its services have not been used so far. Nevertheless, it is certainly unlikely that social entrepreneurship will succeed in Serbia under the current neoliberal economic framework. Experiences with the previous strategies make a case for that. As for the problem of secondary raw material collectors, the *Strategy for the Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia for the 2016-2025 Period* proposes the following: the collectors should become small entrepreneurs and self-employment programs should be initiated. Nonetheless, this puts the Roma in an even worse position. Meagre subsidies which can be obtained for starting entrepreneur businesses are yet another problematic part of this "policy" according to which the Roma should survive in the market competition jungle regardless of the lowest position on the labor market.³³ We have seen that the strategies implemented in Serbia, whether republican or local, frequently remained a dead letter.

When we talk about the city of Belgrade and the challenges that the Roma communities face, we have to mention substandard Roma settlements. Substandard settlement is defined as any group of housing units that has one of the following characteristics: 1) inadequate access to potable water; 2) inadequate access to infrastructure; 3) bad quality of housing units; 4) overcrowded housing units; 5) not regulated or insecure legal status of housing units and land, including unresolved legal ownership of housing units and land. In Serbia, Belgrade has

³³ Maja Solar, *Inkluzija kao depolitizacija romske zajednice (Inclusion as Depolitization of the Roma Community)*: <http://slobodnifilozofski.com/2019/12/inkluzija-depolitizacija-romske-zajednice.html> (last access on 27/11/2022)

the highest percentage of substandard Roma settlements which are integrated in formal settlements – 58%. Belgrade has 10% of the total number of substandard settlements created in the past 15 years. The largest number of substandard settlements is on the territory of three municipalities: Čukarica, Obrenovac and Novi Beograd. According to the data of the Secretariat for Property and Legal Affairs, 192 Roma families use social housing units in Belgrade.

Centres for social work play a significant role in better integration of the Roma into society. The City Center for Social Work provides social protection in accordance with the *Law on Social Protection*. The local *Decision on Social Protection Rights and Services* defines the activities of the centre which are financed from the budget of the city of Belgrade. The organizational structure of the City Centre for Social Work comprises 17 municipality departments, one in each city municipality, which decide on access to rights and services of the user as defined by the law and the legal acts, and performs other social protection activities. The most frequent issues raised by collaborators of the Centre are the irregular registration of the Roma citizens in the registry of the National Employment Service. Regular registration is a precondition for access to the right to financial social allowance. Moreover, Roma children who receive child allowances do not regularly attend primary school. Another frequent practice is the non-registration of employment by a user of financial social allowance (so-called "black work"). However, we cannot place all the blame on the Roma. Because the state promotes the *workfare* doctrine over the *welfare* doctrine, it is widely believed that one must work in order to receive social

assistance, which is essentially ridiculous. Over several decades the policy has decreased social allowances and this is one of the principal reasons for the difficult social situation in Serbia which is reflected in its contradictions during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Strategy's vision is: "The City of Belgrade is a good place for life and work of all of its citizens." The general aim of the Strategy is: "Advancement of the socioeconomic position of the Roma in the city of Belgrade with respect to minority rights and achievement of higher social inclusion in the areas of education, housing, employment, healthcare, and social protection." The formulation of the general aim is harmonized with the general aim of the *Revised Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia for the 2022-2030 Period*, which specifies: "Advancement of the quality of life of the Roma in the Republic of Serbia with respect of human and minority rights, elimination of discrimination and giganism as a form of racism, and attaining a higher level of social inclusion in all the segments of the society." Before we further analyze specific areas of the Strategy, we should underline that the vision and general aim are well formulated and that their realization can only be evaluated after a certain amount of time. Such formulation instills hope that there will be acceptable solutions for the old problems that the Roma community faces. Nonetheless, we should be cautious because, so far, all the strategies had generated high hopes, but their implementation had only yielded extremely meager results.

As for education, the Strategy provides that Roma children should have access to high-quality early childhood develop-

ment. Moreover, it states that the Roma children and youth should get help to graduate from elementary and secondary school. It is necessary to further inform parents and pupils about the importance of education and to provide support in regular school attendance and realization of the school programs. Finally, the last aim states that the Roma children and youth should have a safe, violence-free, inclusive, and efficient environment for learning as well as access to education on all levels without discrimination and their cultural identity should be respected and preserved.

Regarding employment, the existing employment and self-employment programs that aim to increase participation of the Roma in the formal labor market should be further implemented and new programs should be created. Additional education programs should be reinforced as well as training that helps develop knowledge, qualifications, competencies, and skills of the Roma. Finally, the struggle against discrimination of the Roma in the sphere of employment should be initiated and followed by the creation of decent work conditions.

It seems that the Strategy is the most ambitious in the part that refers to housing, where it mentions several significant endeavours. In the first place, there will be attempts to provide communal and road infrastructure in the Roma settlements that match the requirements. Furthermore, there will be efforts to connect the housing units which fulfil the conditions to the communal infrastructure. Supporting the legalization of facilities in Roma settlements is a crucial objective that will surely present difficulties for lawyers and the Republic Geodetic Institute, but is by no means unattainable. The Strategy

provides different forms of housing support for the relocation of the citizens of substandard Roma settlements which are on the territory that is inadequate for housing, as well as adequate, accessible, and safe housing. Finally, it provides different types of housing support to the vulnerable Roma.

By increasing the number of health mediators and conducting ongoing field work, it is hoped to increase the accessibility of health care for Roma. The second measure that seems to be indispensable is the improvement of inter-sectorial cooperation and exchange of information that would increase the coverage of healthcare protection in the Roma population. According to the Roma activists who do fieldwork, it seems that inter-sectorial cooperation did not function well in the past. The third measure comprises an extension of existing and development of the new public healthcare programs for the Roma, with the focus on the youth, women, persons with disability, the age groups over 65, and the LGBTIQ+ population. The fourth and the last measure is the development of informative and educational programs for the Roma with the aim to advance health status and access to healthcare services, with a special focus on reproductive health and family planning.

Similar objectives exist for social protection, such as enhancing intersectoral cooperation, growing knowledge, bolstering the status of vulnerable populations, etc. Suppression of child, early, and forced marriages as well as support for establishing legal visibility for all people of Roma nationality, including the registration of children at birth, are differences between the aims specified in the area of health care compared to the prior ones. By making them legally visible, children who are regis-

tered in the birth registry could enjoy a higher quality of life. In addition, by registering children at birth, the state may be able to strengthen its efforts to ensure legal security.

The last chapters of the Strategy stipulate that the Secretariat in charge will work on the implementation of the Strategy in the respective areas. It is important to mention that the Strategy and the related action plans will be implemented by Coordination Body for Advancement of the Position and Social Inclusion of the Roma and Monitoring the Implementation of the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Territory of the City of Belgrade for the 2022-2032 Period*. The expert group of Coordination bodies will monitor the implementation of the measures and activities through quantitative and qualitative success indicators which the Strategy defines. The civil sector representatives will be present at the meetings of the Expert group. This group has the task to prepare yearly reports on measures and activities implementation, and the Coordination body should make the reports publicly accessible according to the *Law on Planning System of the Republic of Serbia*. As for the Action plan, it should contain the estimation of the activity costs stated by a specific plan: 1) classification of expenditures according to narrowly defined jurisdiction and measures of the budget users; 2) defining a precise purpose for which the funds will be used; 3) defining the ways of spending the allocated funds and how that relates to midterm circumstances; 4) defining elements for evaluation of measure implementation result.

All in all, the *Strategy for Social Inclusion of the Roma in the Territory of the City of Belgrade for the 2022-2032 Period* represents a significant and all-encompassing document which

instills hope that the quality of the life of the Roma on the territory of Belgrade will improve. Nevertheless, the fact that the Strategy is very ambitious in its aims, sometimes even unrealistic, generates fear, but the time will be the best judge of the results. Until then, we should struggle for the Roma to have a better quality of life and the ability to stand up for themselves in the society in which they live. Better improvements are required, and the only thing that can ensure that they take place is our collective commitment as those who want to see them.

– **SAVIOUR AND CULTURAL-RACIST TONES OF THE EARLY MARRIAGE NARRATIVE**

„(...) Roma women or Muslim women were spoken about as if they were aliens, meaning that they were distant women, women who are forced to marry and wear veils.“
(Carmen Gheorghe, Letiția Mark, Enikő Vincze, *The Romani Women's Movement*, 116)

Early marriages appear to be one of the favourite feminist topics related to Roma women. Yet, what are the narratives of early marriage, and what feminisms do they stem from? As there isn't and never has been just one feminism, it's crucial to identify which feminist current anything comes from because each feminism has its own set of political and ideological presumptions, as well as values and worldviews. Specific *policies* are connected to the theoretical presumptions of feminisms, even though they are not explicitly supported. So, for example, if some feminism sees equal redistribution of housework between men and women as a key component of its struggles against the existing gender division of labour, then this goal is fully incorporated into liberal feminism, which will not question the capitalist system, state or other institutions which support this system. However, if the aim of the feminist struggle is socialization of housework, which should not be kept in

the private sphere of home but made as public as possible, and accessible to the majority of people – for example to provide as many free kindergarten, open-access public laundromats, communal kitchens etc. – then this aim corresponds to social feminism.

While some feminisms, such as radical feminism, emphasize that men are the primary cause of the problem and as a result, they focus on male supremacy and, in particular, patriarchy (a separate system of power that has always existed), other feminisms, on the other hand, believe that the issues are more intricate and intertwined and that they cannot be resolved in such a simplistic manner; they therefore cannot be thought reductively, transhistorically, and abstractly. The problems are structurally interconnected, so that the problem of gendered oppression is not isolated and cannot be thought separately from the existing system of production. Therefore, some feminisms talk about *capitalism* as a social formation in which there are complex relations – exploitation, various oppressions (including gender-based oppression) and forms of subjugation of people – and they consider the ways to overcome such a system, as is the case with Marxist feminisms.

The approaches to particular feminist topics partially overlap, but some of them differ to such an extent that one can speak of feminist conflicts. The feminist narrative from which we discuss early marriages, which also occur in Roma communities, is therefore not irrelevant. It is not only the matter of thinking and talking, but also the matter of specific *politics* which will be developed based on narratives, and some of these policies are highly problematic. For example, when Islamopho-

bic policies and the so-called war on terrorism are supported in the name of feminist principles – as in is the case of justification of the war in Afghanistan due to the alleged rescue of Afghan women from the brutality of their patriarchal culture – then such feminist currents are part of the perspective that supports nationalism (also called *femonationalism*) and imperialism (*femoimperialism*). This does not mean that we should not talk about the situation and experiences of Afghan women and fight for their better position, but this certainly cannot be achieved through imperialist, Islamophobic and xenophobic mechanisms. It is equally important to talk about early marriages in Roma communities from a feminist perspective that is progressive and liberating, and that does not support exploitative, colonial, white supremacist, imperialist, racist, nationalist, police, and other such endeavours.

Here, I will outline some of the main issues with the prevailing narratives regarding early and forced marriages, as well as some of the directions for a feminism that never gives up on its revolutionary aims and that constantly struggles for a better society. Emancipatory feminism does not separate theory from practice, but seeks to provide analyses that can be directions for further action, as well as activities and organizing that can deepen reflection. Feminism which I consider an adequate analytical framework for social change belongs to the anti-racist, decolonial and queer-Marxist currents. In a longer text, I made some suggestions for how Romani feminist themes might be interpreted in light of the social reproduction theory, the modern version of Marxist feminism, while in this essay I'll pay particular attention to

the narratives and guidelines that will reflect early marriages more specifically.

Critique of linking early marriages to Roma tradition

One of the most common narratives about early marriages in Roma communities assumes that this phenomenon is related to Roma *tradition, customs* and *culture*. This is, primarily, a mere assumption, and not an explanation, because there is no solid corroborating evidence for it, nor are such claims developed as scientific arguments in these narratives. Those are assumptions and descriptions without explanations. So, this is already problematic at the theoretical level because we cannot develop a meaningful theory with *descriptions* and assumptions instead of *explanations*. In order to establish meaningful connections between ideas and to provide an explanation for *why* something occurs rather than generalizing about a population based solely on the occurrence or frequency of an event (in this case, it is generalized that the phenomenon is typical of the so-called Roma culture and tradition), it is essential to develop solid arguments. So, the first error of this assumption is that it does not explain, but describes, and within the description it generalizes something as though it occurs everywhere within quite diverse Roma communities, without offering credible evidence and without comparison to other communities.

The second error stems from the assumption that there is a *single* Roma community and – consequently – a *single* Roma culture and tradition. Nevertheless, such phenomenon has never

existed and **we can only talk about Roma communities and their cultures and traditions in the plural**. In her research on American Roma communities, anthropologist Carol Miller³⁴ has pointed out some differences, including those that do not easily fit into a patriarchal "breadwinner" model, whereby the man earns the money and the woman stays at home. She has noted that – in Mačva Roma communities – wives are required to be able to earn money (usually working as fortunetellers) while husbands are evaluated based on their appearance and dancing skills. Thus, in some Roma tribes, it is more common for the wife to support the family rather than the husband. Roma culture and tradition are greatly complicated and enriched by the fact that they are comprised of individuals of various citizenships, ethnicities, religious beliefs, and languages.

However, the narrative that supports the assertion that the phenomenon of early marriage is something fundamental to Roma culture and tradition generates the most troubling implications regarding **cultural racism**. When a negative practice is asserted to be what characterizes a community, it is then given to that community as some sort of vital mark, characteristic, trait, etc., which actually connotes racist descriptions (whether consciously or unconsciously). Thus, the Roma are portrayed as uneducated, criminal, "primitive", violent, and as people who practice something that is outdated in other communities and remains characteristic only of their communities. This is yet another way of downplaying systemic violence and attributing it to individuals and specific groups.

³⁴ See: *Gypsy Sexuality*, 224, 225.

Traditional and patriarchal Romani values and practices are at the core of the interpretive framework of the missionary-interventionist approach to early marriage. Within this setting, nomadism, strict gender norms, non-planning of the family, virginity cult, traditional Roma costumes (headscarves, long colourful skirts and traditional clothing), regarding divorce as a violation of honour, etc., are viewed as an apparently universal trait of Roma cultures. Early marriages (as well as arranged marriages and forced marriages) are assumed to be a constitutive part of Roma communities and their macho culture, and are, therefore, frequently discussed in moralizing ethno-racial undertones, from an allegedly superior vantage point.

Although poverty is occasionally cited in the list of presumptive causes of early marriage, this interpretation is culturalist and it primarily adheres to culturalist views (*Roma are traditionally poor*, declared the president of Serbia a few years ago, thus, it is simple to believe that their situation is due to their own fault). Therefore, even though it may appear that poverty is one of the factors that leads people to consider marriage as a way to escape difficult existential circumstances, there is no analysis of the political-economic framework to explain how Romani women's class and racialized-gendered position is structurally produced in such a way. The cultural-racist undertones of this lens do not link analytically gendered phenomena with more general structural conditions (systemic racism and patriarchal relations within capitalism as a whole), but rather interpret them as a result of Roma culture, which they perceive as being extremely patriarchal.

Critique of linking only patriarchy and early marriages

Following numerous criticisms of this culture-racist account of the problem of early marriages, some interpreters have somewhat altered their narrative and now they speak of patriarchy instead of Roma culture and tradition. Hence, they assert that early marriages are a fundamental aspect of patriarchy. Early marriages are not a Roma tradition; rather, these are patriarchal practice that subordinates women and assumes their gender roles as mother, wife, and housekeeper.

The first problem with this feminist approach is that it slips very easily in the first interpretive framework. However if early marriages are considered a patriarchal phenomena and data indicates that Roma communities perform early marriages at a higher rate than other communities, therefore this practice is once more inextricably linked to Roma communities. In fact, it is assumed that patriarchy is more pervasive among Roma people than among non-Roma people, with the latter group allegedly experiencing less of it. Thus, from the outset, this interpretation retains cultural-racist and patronizing overtones, and an intent to instruct those who supposedly do not know themselves what their biggest problems are. Hence, numerous programs and action plans are designed in order to purportedly rescue young Roma women from the clutches of patriarchy.

Another false presumption is that gendered phenomena are solely the result of patriarchy, and this one is also political. Namely, the idea that early marriages are primarily patriarchal practices is linked to the assumption that *all women* in the so-

called patriarchy are (equally) subordinated and oppressed. The category "woman" is assumed without questioning its actual meaning. Moreover, women are treated as a homogeneous group bonded through what is claimed to be equal subordination. This hence creates the political illusion of *sisterhood*: since gender is considered as being distinct from all other social categories and forms of oppression, it appears that all women are in the same or very similar situations and have strong (or "female," gender) bonds of solidarity. According to that, it doesn't matter that, for example, a wealthy white woman is extremely right-wing and racist because, for God's sake, she is a woman, putting her in a position where she is already equal to or similar to a poor Roma woman from a substandard settlement because they both allegedly share the same enemy, embodied in patriarchy. *Gender* is highlighted here as the primary category of oppression while class and race / ethnicity are mentioned in parentheses. Hence, an equal suffering of all women is assumed — as based on that an alleged sisterly solidarity.

Therefore, even if the early marriage phenomenon is not only associated with Roma communities and it has been demonstrated that it exists in many other communities, including white communities, and if this phenomenon were only associated with the so-called system of patriarchy, however this explanation would actually be implausible. Such feminist perspectives privilege *one type of oppression* and as a result, the struggle against *gendered* oppression. Even when other kinds of oppression are mentioned (based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical ability, age), they are assumed as secondary, as something less important, as something added on, de-

rived and sided, rather than as something as essential as gender based oppression. But there is even less attempt to show how all these forms of oppression – as well as exploitative relation – are co-constituted, and how they are part of an all-encompassing social system. Gendered oppression is assumed to be an eternal oppression, as if it has always existed and as if its specificity is not rooted in different historical contexts and systems of production. That approach is consequently ahistorical or transhistorical.

Historical context: early marriages are not only patriarchal practices

There are more nuanced feminist approaches that attempted to explain early marriages (among other phenomena) in a more complex way, taking into account historical context. These interpretations, which are not as reductive as feminisms that attribute nearly all societal issues to gender oppression and become entangled in theoretical-political contradictions, include *intersectional feminisms*.

We have seen that early marriages are generally presupposed as something related to Roma tradition and culture, or that they are thought exclusively as patriarchal practices, but, this narrative also slides easily to cultural-racism. The first two narratives are patronizing and moralizing, because according to these perspectives the Roma should be instructed, civilized, punished, made aware of the need to end such practices, etc.

Intersectional feminist perspectives usually contextualize the phenomenon of early marriage and place it in a historical framework. In this way, they show that it is not only about patriarchal practices but also about other structural oppressions. As multiple forms of oppression are emphasized as equally important by intersectional feminism, the phenomenon of early marriage cannot be explained solely as a result of oppression based on gender or an outcome of oppression based on race or ethnicity; rather, all forms of discrimination are taken into consideration.

The intersectional *historical positioning* of the phenomenon of early marriage³⁵ is very important because it shows the historical connection to slavery. Angéla Kóczé, Roma feminist, also has such a historical perspective in mind. She recalls the institution of Roma slavery on the territory of present-day Romania, Moldova, and Wallachia, which still existed at the end of the 19th century. Child marriages were created as a protection against abuse and rape by masters. It was possible for the parents to protect the Roma girls from the slave owners if they married the daughters young. Thus, when the phenomenon of early marriage is historicized, it becomes clear that it is by no means only related to patriarchal practices but also to the economic context or system of production, in this case the **system of Roma slavery** and racialized labour regimes. This practice came about as a result of structural oppression, which is con-

35 On historicizing and contextualizing of the phenomenon of early marriage and their connection to the institution of Roma slavery see: Angéla Kóczé, *Gender, Ethnicity and Class: Romani Women's Political Activism and Social Struggles*, 68; *Seksualnost cigana (Gypsy Sexuality)*, 120; Laura Corradi, *Gypsy feminism. Intersectional Politics, Alliances, Gender and Queer Activism*, chapters III i IV.

stituted by the intertwining of exploitation and subordination based on class, race, and gender. Early marriages and early parenthood are patriarchal practices but they are also practices that have their origins in the economic living conditions, as well as practices deeply rooted in history that cannot be treated separately from poverty, racism, citizenship status, deportations, forced evictions, migrations, and the subordination of particular communities based on race and ethnicity – namely, all the structural and historical conditions.

Cultural-racist narratives have developed throughout the history of capitalism and do not concern only Roma communities. For example, Black feminists point out that black men's violence against women has been demonized and portrayed as greater than the white men's violence against women. Statistics also show that this was not just a matter of representation: black men were disproportionately punished and incarcerated. In order to justify their imprisonment, punishment, and marginalization at every turn, some groups of people are presented in a negative light, making it appear as though they are the root of violence. This conceals the fact that the *system* is a central point that generates violence. The racialized system through which the non-white population is disproportionately criminalized, imprisoned, and punished – as well as characterized as “primitive,” “backward,” “criminal,” etc. – is essentially one of the ways for accepting (erasing and forgetting) the violence of capitalism. Capitalism was created and is maintained by violence, but capitalist violence is also normalized through “shifting the blame” on individuals. This process of normalization is happening in the name of “overcoming” the violence of po-

tential alternatives (real-socialisms, attempts at building communism, etc.), and this approach is used to justify the so-called defence from the violence of other groups (Muslims, Roma, Black people, other racialized people).

Vulnerability

One of the important thematic threads in feminist narratives of early marriages concerns the concept of vulnerability. And while "saviour", missionary, and civilizing types of feminism assume early married Roma women as vulnerable, as victims, as those who are deprived of their subjectivity, and as those who are seen as passive, progressive feminisms understand that vulnerability itself is something that is produced and constructed through all levels of the system. Therefore, vulnerability is not an inherent characteristic of women (Roma women, children, the elderly, or the impoverished, etc.), but rather it is fabricated by institutions, the state, the market and capital. There are no vulnerable women, they are neither the "weaker sex" nor are they victims per se, instead, some women, men and others are repeatedly and through intricate mechanisms put in situations that render them to *become* vulnerable, which make them vulnerable. So, people are not vulnerable by themselves, but they are ***made vulnerable*** because they are put in a situation where they are deprived of numerous opportunities, because the ***system produces vulnerability***. Vulnerability does not relate to biology, but to the bodies as socioeconomic bodies and situations into which these bodies are placed.

Hence, the saviour feminist approach, which depicts early-married Roma women as victims who need to be saved, begins with extreme inequality and does not acknowledge people as subjects. In the saviour feminist perspective, the bodies of the Roma women are constructed as targets of oppression, discrimination, and violence, while Romani culture is perceived as patriarchal, backwards, primitive, and outside of a progressive society. With such a viewpoint, the existence of patriarchal dynamics and practices in non-Roma communities is disregarded, giving the impression that Roma victims should be rescued from the clutches of patriarchy and assisted in assimilating into the civilized world where patriarchal oppression is supposedly absent or less prevalent. Feminists who approach Roma women from this perspective are gravely concerned about their subordination to the norms and customs of their own communities, which is why they endorse racist constructions.

Hence, the image of victimized (and potentially empowered with the help of white saviour) women is not only a very limited, narrow, shortsighted, and impoverished interpretive point of view, but it is also difficult from such a feminist perspective to see any liberating social change for Roma women as real subjects. Instead of advocating for their self-organization and politicization, Roma women are portrayed as passive victims, de-subjectivized and vulnerable beings. That's why it comes as no surprise that poor Roma women reject this "hand of salvation" and opt to live mostly in ghettos and mahalas instead, where they are completely cut off from middle-class white "saviors" due to racialized oppression and class exploitation.

It not enough to change the conscience and laws,
we need the change of the system

The major objectives of the prevailing approaches to the issue of early marriages are legal: it is required to implement current laws, eventually supplement the regulations with provisions, and instruct individuals who are not familiar with the laws how to apply them. This presumes that the system is essentially reliable. The system itself is not under question; it may only require small adjustments. The patriarchal practices of some groups of people are demonized. Therefore, all that is required is to raise their awareness of certain problematic behaviors, educate them about the laws, provide them with legal advice, when necessary, and even make the laws more stringent, and apparently everything will be OK if they cease engaging in these negative behaviors. The question of whether young Roma women will actually have the same opportunities on the labour market as others who came out of the army of the labour, whether they will have the same opportunities to have safe roof over their heads as middle-class white women, whether they will have equal access to institutions of education and health, etc., is treated as if it is less important and as if it does not concern early marriages.

Such narratives emphasize "*legal*" and "*conscious raising*" goals rather than emancipatory ones for society as a whole, thus they instead fit into the established social system and especially its normative framework. It appears that overcoming these issues is a matter of conscience, or a question that rests primarily on the changing consciousness and training, because from

such a feminist perspective the socioeconomic conditions are not in the foreground. The politics that emerges from such perspectives will not be in the direction of changing structures, but rather in the direction of *raising the awareness* of Roma women and empowering them. If the Roma women and their families are enlightened (by the true civic values), if the violence of their husbands is explained to them and reported to the police, if they are provided with contraceptives and informed about sex, marriage and the responsibilities associated with it, if they are informed about the importance of attending school regularly (regardless of whether they have enough to eat, because education seems to be the magic wand that solves everything), and if they are pushed into the labor market (to strive for themselves) or convinced to launch their own business (which they cannot sustain), which will subject them to debt slavery, then they will supposedly be freed from patriarchal chains.

The basis of this viewpoint is *individualization*, an ideology that holds people accountable for their own situations, failures, problems and defeats. The ideology of individualism denies institutional violence, state violence, capitalist violence, and market violence; in this way the structural violence is disguised and normalized, with concealment functioning as a constitutive dynamic for the normalization process. The ideologues of individualism are based on the assumption that everyone has equal chances under capitalism: if the system is good and fair, then everyone has the same opportunities; however, if there are losers in this game, then they have only themselves to blame for their failures; and if, supposedly, everyone has the same opportunities, then those who do not take advantage of those

opportunities have only themselves to blame. The patriarchal mentality is believed to be the cause of the oppression, lack of education, and poverty experienced by Roma women. If this mentality is altered, and if they are taught how to delay getting married too early, they will have an equal chance at succeeding in life. If they do not succeed, despite the "saving hand" offered, then it is supposedly their fault.

Thus, saviour feminisms rely on the state and laws, and they insist that the legal and institutional framework is neutral and applicable to all. However, the history of capitalism clearly demonstrates that the laws have never been neutral and that we should speak above all about *the violence of the laws and the state*. "Yet, the law is not neutral; it is the emanation of the patriarchal and capitalist State".³⁶ Therefore, these **civilizatory feminisms**, as Françoise Vergès refers to them, are **state feminisms**, or feminisms that theoretically and politically justify the state. In the name of women's rights, these feminist perspectives frequently support imperial, Islamophobic, colonial, racist, securitarian, market-oriented, etc. projects. Civilizatory feminisms' mission is to save non-white and poor women from (violent) men, from their patriarchal communities, from "primitive" and "backward" cultures (cultures that must join the capitalism bandwagon and be subjected to surveillance, punishment, and debt, while labor bodies must be harnessed in the production of wealth for the wealthy). Civilizatory feminism claims that it speaks **in the name of all women**, as if all women are in equal positions. "In the North, a State and so-

³⁶ Vergès, *Feministička teorija nasilja (A Feminist Theory of Violence)*, p. 90.

called “universalist civilizational” feminism developed, unper-
turbed by security-based and imperialist policies.”³⁷ Thus, from
the perspective of this type of feminism, the solutions to early
marriages should be constructed within legislative, state and
carceral framework (through reporting violence to the police,
stricter sanctions for violence, sex offender registry, incarceration,
surveillance, punishment).

All of these problematic feminist frameworks – which we
have labelled here as cultural-racist, missionary, saviour, civili-
zatory, gender parity and state feminisms – are also referred to
as carceral or pro-prison frameworks.

Carceral feminisms endorse, or in some way support,
harsher punishments, more prisons, monitoring and surveil-
lance, a stronger judiciary, stricter regulations, and other meas-
ures that strengthen the current criminal justice system. Such
feminisms presuppose the police, courts, law, and legislation as
neutral institutions of protection, when in fact these institu-
tions are the main causes of violence and consistently fall short
of providing equal protection for everyone. These institutions
already differentiate between those who are subjects worthy of
life, law and protection, and those who are not subject enough
(or not subject at all) and therefore are not worthy of life in
dignity, law and protection. The state institutions of protection
actually do not protect the majority of people, because they
are created with the purpose to subjugate and maintain under
control those who could be a threat to the rich. Hence, these in-
stitutions are not the framework for a solution to the issue of

37 Vergès, p. 35.

the early marriages. "Victims of sexual violence are constantly let down by the criminal justice system. In what mainstream feminists often consider the "best case" scenario", perpetrators are imprisoned in settings where misogyny is endemic, rape is ubiquitous, and institutions are vehicles for racism, colonialism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia."³⁸ **State protection policies** have a racist, imperialist, and sexist history. They have historically protected some bodies while excluding and oppressing others who were deemed undeserving of protection. The police and the army are institutions that embody violence, and also major instances of sexual harassment and rape. The state's protection from violence cannot be liberating because it obscures the fact that this protection is also violence, and especially violence against marginalized and oppressed groups. The state and its carceral framework criminalize certain groups of people, further oppressing them. "In the name of security for all, protection is being militarized, behavior penalized, and communities criminalized".³⁹ As a historically recent institution, the police was established with the purpose of protecting the interests of the middle class and the (capitalist) state, so we cannot accept the narratives that try to convince us that the police is there to protect us all equally. Protection cannot be left to the structures designed to maintain and deepen the divide between those whose lives deserve protection and those who do not.

38 Jana Kujundžić, *Teorijska čitanka: Zašto koncept zatvora nije feministički (Theoretical Textbook: Why the Concept of Prison is not Feminist)*, VoxFeminae, 2021.

39 Vergès, *Feministička teorija nasilja (A Feminist Theory of Violence)*, str. 116.

Which children have the right to childhood?

The narratives on early marriage often call for *the right to childhood* and claim that children who are married early are deprived of the right to childhood. This narrative is hypocritical, however, as it presupposes that all children have the same right to childhood, yet different structural dynamics have predefined who has that right and who does not. Notwithstanding the proliferation of laws and norms, as well as the multiplication of books, research papers, pedagogical knowledge, advancements in our understanding of child psychology, etc., a huge number of children in this world do not actually have the right to childhood. Numerous children are deprived and criminalized, marked and made delinquents, so this right is not universal, but class-based, racialized, gendered, and heteronormative. Among other things, the capitalist world, separates children into those who have the right to childhood and those who do not.

Roma children are well aware that the prevailing bourgeois norms of childhood for white children do not apply to them. Moreover, Roma children and their parents are usually considered responsible for their own difficult situations: the children are blamed for not studying enough, for not attending school, for giving up and for simply not trying hard enough; the parents are blamed for not being good parents, for not caring enough, for lacking parenting skills, and their children may even be taken away from them. The division between those who can be great parents and those who cannot was also apparent during slavery, because state protection policies never protected non-white poor parents and their children.

Roma children do not have the same access to public spaces like non-Roma children, and they are quite aware of which schools, classes, health care facilities, jobs etc. are not appropriate for them. These children are subject to the segregation order, which designates which places are safe and which are intended for criminalized bodies, that is, for them. While non-Roma children from the middle class grow up with more privileges and have far more opportunities to develop their skills, knowledge and imagination, Roma children living in poverty do not have their most basic needs met. The development of capacities and knowledge of Roma children is not supported, and they are stigmatized, demonized, made to feel less worthwhile at every turn. This is already embedded in capitalism and is not merely related to early marriages theme.

Early marriages as a part of the capitalist structure

Early marriages and arranged marriages are not exclusively linked to Roma communities, contrary to what stereotypes of the Roma prefer to portray, nor are they exclusively a patriarchal practice. Early marriages are merely one more cog in the machinery of capitalism. Early weddings are portrayed either exclusively as a patriarchal institution or as a part of Romani culture, which obscures and erases more nuanced power and class relations. Feminist perspectives that erase or minimize ***institutional violence***, also contribute to its continued normalization, and they also do so by reducing gender-based violence to patriarchal relations.

To understand the phenomenon of early marriage, we need to think it within a different interpretive framework. Even though this phenomenon is related to gender, we should first acknowledge the *broader* systemic framework and connect the pressure to get married young to structural coercions, as well as to the *entire* network of violence and compulsion. When early marriages are contextualized and historicized, as is done from an intersectional perspective, and when the structural framework is addressed, as in queer-Marxist and decolonial feminisms, it turns out that the phenomenon of early marriage is very much linked to economic coercion and deprivation, to the ongoing creation of racialized/ethnicized workforce as in- and formal low-skilled cheap workforce, with political erasure and ideological demonization, with racist fertility control (because Roma women's motherhood is not as desired as white women's), to racist institutions (educational, medical, social, legal etc.), and to violence against members of Roma communities at all levels. From this framework, it is impossible to discuss early marriages without also addressing other issues like the lack of decent housing and segregated settlements, Roma women's forced sterilization, the lack of access to adequate healthcare, the "Gypsy rooms" in hospitals that are reserved for pregnant Roma women in order to keep them apart from pregnant white women, the constant violence that Roma children experience in schools, the disproportionate number of incarcerations of the Roma and even more violent treatment by the police, the lack of access to jobs that could provide for a life beyond mere survival, and the racialization of work, as a result of which the Roma and other racialized groups mostly access only informal precarious underpaid and non-paid jobs.

Finally, the analysis of early marriages from this critical perspective, first and foremost ***critiques and brings into question the very institution of marriage***, which appears in the capitalist societies as an institution that strengthens private ownership and inheritance relations. The institution of marriage in capitalism is an institution that essentially deepens inequalities. Therefore, the progressive narrative on early marriages should consider that as well.

Separating the situation of Roma women who marry early from the structural violence that they experience everywhere, leads to even more individualization and blame-laying of individuals and their ethnic communities. In this way, the individuals are portrayed as the ones who oppress, while the structure that produces oppression remains invisible. For this reason, by explaining the relations between class and various categories that constitute capitalist oppression, queer-Marxist, anti-racist and decolonial feminist perspectives seek to explain the *logic* between early marriages and capitalist relations, as well as *historical* particularities and *situational* anchorage. This perspective shows how the formal and informal labour force of Roma people, along with the remaining reserve army of workers, is in fact completely integrated into the capitalist economy. For this reason the public policies that play a key role in creation of exploitable and cheap labor force in neoliberal regimes appear very contradictory when they advocate for integration of the Roma in society. The concept of social inclusion obscures the fact that ***Roma communities are already integrated into the system which produces inequalities***. The Roma women are also included in the capitalist work regime: in social-repro-

ductive work of renewal of racialized/ethnicized workforce, as well as in large swathes of the informal, low-skilled and cheap formal workforce. By performing social-reproductive work in marginalized households, most often in segregated settlements, they create and maintain racialized workforce in the conditions of deprivation of adequate housing spaces, while they are included in the informal and formal labor sphere as those who are oppressed on the basis of race and gender, and thus are frequently super-exploited. So, from that perspective, **the concept of inclusion and integration obscure the fact that the Roma actually are integrated** in (more and more deregulated) labor market, **which contributes in their depoliticization.**

To understand and analyze the violence of the system means to explain that gendered violence is not violence that only (Roma) men are responsible for, nor is it violence that originates from Roma culture and tradition. Systemic or structural violence produces and maintains capitalism in variety of complex ways: it is the violence of economic compulsion, it is the violence of capital and the market, it is the violence of the state and all of its institutions, it is the violence that is not directed only against people, but also against animals, plants, environment, the violence that produces climate disasters, depletes the land, destroys rivers, seas, and oceans, and renders this world uninhabitable.

The system has political and ideological mechanisms with which it conceals its own violence. Nevertheless, as feminists, we cannot accept the given divisions of the world, and even less should we contribute to their deepening. Therefore, we cannot

support narratives that stigmatize Roma communities or reduce problems to those caused by so-called patriarchy, depict men as enemies while simultaneously referring to all women as "sisters". So, we cannot support the solutions that strengthen the state, courts, laws, and police, nor the solutions that will support discipline, surveillance, incarceration, and more severe punishment of the members of marginalized groups.

An important part of theory as well as practice is not only *to learn something* but also *to unlearn something*. It is time for us to unlearn the framework that strengthens patronism and culture-racism, and supports the division of the world on lives that matter and those that do not.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF THE AUTHORS

Sevdulje Ramadani has a degree in psychology and is currently a master's student of sociology and social anthropology at the Central European University in Vienna. Her interests include questions of urban poverty and marginalized urban areas in which mainly the Roma population reside. As she is currently working on her master's thesis, she also addresses the question of how informal practices are reproduced and maintained in such spaces. Her narrow interests are social reproduction activities and housing questions. She worked as a social mediator within the project organized by *Roma Forum of Serbia*, and has contributed to the Roma community by providing information. Since 2021 she has been working on a short documentary film that intends to talk about the problem of residence registration of the internally displaced Roma from Kosovo.

Paola Yo is a *drag* artist, activist and researcher from Novi Sad. Since 2006, she has been an activist and volunteer in Roma non-governmental organizations, currently a member of *Roma Forum of Serbia*. From the fall 2019, she has been a member of the organization IZADJI (*Come Out*) from Novi Sad and works on LGBTQ+ topics. Paola has participated in various projects, seminars and trainings to acquire knowledges and skills that

help her support her community and fight for a better position in society for the oppressed.

Robert Kasumović holds a master's degree in pharmacy. He is an activist of the *Roma Forum of Serbia* and mostly works on political education projects as well as projects that address the collectors of secondary raw materials. Robert also writes for the portal *Mašina*. With Predrag Momčilović, he co-authored the publication *Collectors of Secondary Raw Materials (In)Visible Workers (Roma Forum of Serbia, 2020)*.

Marina Salić was born in Bor on 20 / 12 / 1993. She is a chemical laboratory technician, an activist since 2012, and the president of the non-governmental organization REAB which aims to support social inclusion of the Roma, Egyptians, and Ashkali. Marina is the leader of the team of young eloquent people who are the future of Roma activism in For and also participates in the drafting of strategic documents that address social inclusion of the Roma in Bor. Besides, she is an artist, writes poetry, prose, and plays, and acts in Roma plays realized by the organization whose member she is.

Dina Vučković has a degree in psychology and is currently a master's student at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad. She is currently completing her internship in the Gerontology centre, and studies geriatric psychology. Dina is engaged in projects that address Roma children in education as well as Roma families. Her narrow interests are family and partnership relations. She completed a training in systemic family therapy and is currently attending a training in transactional-assimilationist approach to psychotherapy. She is actively working in psychological counselling.

Aleksandar Marković holds a graduate degree in law and a master's degree in European integrations. He was born in 1990, completed elementary and high school in Ivanjica, graduated from the Faculty of Law in Belgrade in 2014, and obtained a master's degree in European law in 2016. Aleksandar speaks English and French. He has been active in the civil sector since the beginning of 2020, worked as a legal counsellor in the Belgrade Human Rights Centre, and from November 2022 works as a legal counsellor in the Centre for Research and Social Development IDEAS. Aleksandar has been active in the *Roma Forum of Serbia* since January 2022 where he works as a legal counsellor.

Maja Solar (1980, Zagreb) holds a doctoral degree in Philosophy. Her research work focuses on social and political theory. She writes poetry and prose, and is a member of the theoretical and political collective *Gerousia*, and media portal *Slobodni Filozofski*. Maja has published three poetry collections (*Makulalalatura 2008* (awarded with *Brankova Nagrada*), *Jellemző, hogy nem természetes* (*Naravno da nije prirodno - Of course it's not natural*) 2015 and *Bez začina* (*Withouts spices - 2017*), as well as poetic-prose experiment *A htela sam* (*And I wanted to - 2022*). She is the author of more than forty articles on social and political theory. Some of her fields of interest are Marxism, Social reproduction theory, labour theory, property theories, luxury theories, history of socialism, as well as queer-Marxist, anti-racist, and anti-carceral movements in feminism. She believes in struggles that do not erase class optics and that liberate all the oppressed, of different genders, sexualities and physicalities, and in production of collective knowledge that will truly be transformative.



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