

## **Romedia Foundation. The story of Katalin Barsony: how can media literacy help Roma women to become motors of social change and overcome discrimination**

I am a Roma woman and a journalist, film maker and managing director at the Budapest-based Roma NGO Romedia Foundation. With my mixed Roma-Jewish background, I created the first-ever documentary series on Roma communities around the world to be broadcast on a mainstream television channel, Mundi Romani – the World through Roma Eyes ([www.mundiromani.com](http://www.mundiromani.com)). With the "I'm a Roma Woman" campaign ([www.romawoman.org](http://www.romawoman.org)) my organization seeks to bring sustainable changes to the ways Roma, women in particular, act as motors for social change.

During its extensive experience filming in Romani communities, the Romedia Foundation ([www.romediafoundation.org](http://www.romediafoundation.org)) has located a huge pool of unused intellectual capital: young Romani women. Many Romani women have an unprecedented opportunity to get a formal education and participate in public life due to changing attitudes within their communities. Also, crucially, recent developments in communication technology offer a unique opportunity to build a network of socially conscious Romani women and ensure the self-representation of their interests in the public discourse. These technological developments have fully restructured audiovisual information provisions, sharing, even mass consumption and its ergonomics. This is resulting in real, important social transformations that have profound effects on how democracy functions on a non-institutional level. Nowadays, the technology that allows audiovisual, instantaneous communication (image+sound+synchronism) is opening the doors of interest representation to those who have ownership of the technology and the capacity to use it. The greatest opportunity lies in the fact that communication technology does not belong to the elites anymore. It is easily available in terms of costs and expertise.

Just as the elimination of illiteracy was a key issue for the development of a middle class in the US and certain European states from the end of the 19th century, leading to a modern sense of social consciousness and transforming our societies, the conscious use of modern audiovisual communication tools have the potential to transform communities that are by and large at the very bottom of the social ladder across Europe. In this respect, young women from the target communities are a key beneficiary group since gender equality has proven itself to be the best investment our societies could make toward world economic and social development.

The Romedia Foundation has a unique profile and experience ([www.mundiromani.com](http://www.mundiromani.com)) that allows it to expand the scope of its "I'm a Roma Woman" campaign ([www.romawoman.org](http://www.romawoman.org)) across borders, with the use of cutting-edge digital ideas and a deep understanding of the complex socio-political barriers to the expression of the voice of Romani women. Our newest project, BUVERO – Roma Woman Live Network (currently in development), intends to develop media literacy at the grassroots level and generate creativity through independent audiovisual content creation by young Romani women while allowing for the content created at the grassroots to enter the public debate and challenge the dominant cultural narrative that circulates about Romani women. Part of an ongoing, complex multi-media empowerment campaign made by and for Romani women, the project combines innovative training in social media communication, modern streaming technologies, video sharing and distribution technologies, and a spectacular live show connecting six isolated communities live and showcasing the product of six months of active use of the newly learned know-how (video testimonies of Romani women – filmed and edited by Romani women). The Romedia

Foundation's long experience in media advocacy shows that shared personal experiences have the power to inspire, develop empathy, engage, and ultimately bring the voice of an unrepresented minority into the cultural patchwork that is Europe.

This is my story:

When I was a child and my grand-mother told me why it is important for me to study, she always said: “, if I had had the chance to study, I would have turned the whole world upside down.” My grand-mother went to school until the fourth grade. At 11, at the time of the 1956 revolution in Hungary, her younger sister died of hunger in her arms. They were this poor. If I am this lucky, to have grown up not in a Roma ghetto at the very edge of a remote village, but in one of Budapest's many housing projects, it is because she taught my mother never to give up. My father is from a family of Jewish intellectuals so my ancestors from both sides are Holocaust survivors. While the Roma are Europe's largest ethnic minority, they barely have any political representation. Without a mother country, without supporters, without financial means, they are consistently the absentees of post-war negotiations and the very first victims of economic and social crises. At each and every wrong turn our societies take, deeply held hatreds directed at us come back to the surface. In Hungary in the past few years, Molotov cocktails were thrown into the houses of nine Roma families. The perpetrators waited for parents and children to come out to escape the fire and shot them dead. Hundreds of Hungarian nationalists still march each and every week in black uniforms in Hungarian villages to intimidate our communities, hoping they will just leave. Disappear.

It is their untold suffering that drove me through the Hungarian education system, from which I have many sour memories full of humiliation and where I learned about the prejudices a great majority of my classmates and teachers have about Roma. But I finished high school. And when I decided to become a sociologist, my only motive was to understand the reasons behind the social disparities I had witnessed since childhood, through my grand-mother's stories and through my own eyes. I wanted to learn about the social and psychological structures which make our societies the way they are. Why do my people, the Roma, have to bear the burden of Europe's most serious stigma on their shoulders? How is it possible that I am the only one among my Roma childhood friends who succeeded in getting a university degree?

Poverty and lack of education put a stamp on the future of millions of Roma children. I often hear from non-Roma people: if they are that poor, why do they have so many children? Because in our culture, children mean everything. They are the bearers of our traditions, our future. They are always a cause for happiness, whatever the circumstances. This is the reason why we even survived in the face of many centuries of oppression, slavery and forced assimilation.

I learned as a child about the power of the media, about the huge number of people we are able to reach through them. At that time, I was the only child in Hungary who, despite her dark skin, was shown on television as part of a “mainstream” show. When I finished college, it was clear to me that I had to use my knowledge for something useful. With my small crew, and with support from civil society, we have been travelling the world for four years now to bear witness to what the Roma are still going through. But also to see and make people see the beauties of our traditions and the incredible resilience of our people in the face of situations nearly all Europeans have only seen on TV or in movies. To put a face and a name on each story, to give a voice to the voiceless. We travelled to more than 30 countries, mainly in Europe.

What we do is nothing more than finding ways for stories of incredible resilience to come to light. For Roma to become visible as they really are and not as most journalists present us, as the child-bearing machine/thief/burden on society representation of Roma that has prevailed throughout the centuries and is still so powerful. Our culture is still unknown to most, rumours and prejudices about who we are abound and make up a wall through which we are trying to break through to show, one story by one story, that we are individuals, mothers, daughters, wives. My grand-mother believed that she could make it through and it is now for me to make sure everyone knows that others made it through, too.