



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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IARO 2003-2004
Bosnia-Herzegovina

Romani Women, a Neglected Population: Race, Class, Gender, and Policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Topic of Research:

The purpose of my two month trip to Bosnia-Herzegovina was to do follow-up research on the situation of Roma (Gypsies) for my Master's degree in cultural anthropology. My research questions included the following: What are the activities, challenges, and successes of local Roma nongovernmental organizations?, Do local non-Roma nongovernmental organizations include Roma in their activities?, What kinds of programs or activities do international nongovernmental organizations have with Roma?, and What is the situation for Romani women? My research questions were formulated based on research that I coordinated while working as a volunteer from 1998-2000 for *Medica Infoteka*, a local women's nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Zenica. I wanted to see whether the political situation and every day lives of Roma had changed since my colleagues and I completed our research in 2000.

Approach and Methodology:

I completed interviews with several local Romani leaders in Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Lukovac. *Sa E Roma* is arguably the most successful and one of the longest running local Roma organizations in Bosnia and I was pleased to learn that the leader of this organization told me that he learned a great deal about civil society

and NGO development from *Medica Infoteka* when my colleagues and I organized a meeting with him in 1999. *Sa E Roma*, like many local Roma NGOs, is focusing its programs on the education of Romani children. Fewer Romani children attend school than non-Romani children; those Romani children who do attend elementary school often do not complete high school or go on to higher levels of education.

Research Findings:

Based on interviews with local non-Romani and Romani individuals who work in the NGO sector, I discovered that there are more programs led by Roma in Bosnia since 2000. There are also more programs targeted specifically to Roma. For example, there are two Romani men working for OSCE. Their responsibility is to build the infrastructure of the local Roma NGO sector in Bosnia. Other international NGOs are also specifically focusing some of their programs on the Roma. For example, in addition to OSCE, the Gender Task Force, the Society for Threatened Peoples, UNHCR, Save the Children, and others have programs specifically targeted for the Roma. There are also some non-Romani NGOs who include Roma in their programs, especially in distributing humanitarian aid.

One program in particular is doing a great deal to address the situation for Romani women specifically. *Romkinje to mogu* (Romani women can do it) is training Romani women throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina to understand their own human rights and learn to be more politically active. I was able to complete interviews with the director of the international nongovernmental organization who funds this research (Gender Task Force) in addition to the local Bosnian woman who coordinates it, and one of the two Romani women who lead the workshops. This Romani woman activist also heads her own Roma organization in Tuzla. I met this woman in 1999 when she was working as a secretary for another Roma organization and I was very pleased to hear that she had started her own organization in 2001.

I asked most of the people I interviewed, whose responsibility is it to address Roma rights and needs in Bosnia? The overwhelming response to my question was "the government." However, the government has done remarkably little in addressing the specific needs of the Roma; it focuses on return, reconstruction, the high unemployment rate and more due to the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia. The government's policy, as well as the attitude of many non-Roma in Bosnia towards the Roma is neglect. Stereotypes that all Roma are thieves, dirty, lazy, violent, and the like persist; one Romani leader told me that he feels like a parrot, always repeating the same things. He says that it is hard to get things done when he is always responding to and fighting the same questions and stereotypes. Romani women I spoke with expressed frustration with Romani men in addition to the stereotypes they face daily from non-Roma.

Despite a greater number of programs targeted for Roma in the NGO sector, most of the Roma I interviewed believe that little has changed for them in the last

few years. In fact, some believe it is more difficult as the unemployment rate continues to soar, too few Romani children are attending school, and the presence of the international community is not what it was right after the 1992-1995 war; there is less humanitarian aid, for example, and therefore less visible assistance. Many Roma agree that educating their children is important, but few have the financial means to send their children to school. Roma and non-Roma alike seem to believe that education is the key to a better, more prosperous future, but finding the means to fulfill this goal is not easy, especially for the Roma.

Preliminary Conclusions:

The situation for Roma in Bosnia-Herzegovina is bleak at best; the government consists of a rotating presidency of three men who are affiliated with nationalist parties of the three majority ethnicities (Bosniac or Bosnian Muslim, Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb) and they very rarely agree. Roma are not represented at any level of the national government. The NGO sector in Bosnia is strong but many members of these organizations - Roma and non-Roma - resent the fact that they are doing the work the government should be doing. It is difficult for even the most successful NGOs to find funding since the war in Bosnia technically ended eight years ago and international support is declining more each year. The government rarely provides funding to the private sector, and thus competition among NGOs is high. Stereotypes of Roma run deep and it is difficult to build unity among the Roma when competition for basic survival as well as funding for local NGOs is so strong. The remarkable lack of formal education among the Romani population is a significant handicap to their political involvement and possible improvement in their overall living standards.

Despite these bleak circumstances, I believe that situation for Roma in Bosnia is ever so slowly improving. Unfortunately, building civil society is not a process that produces results overnight. During the war and for several years after the war, the international community provided a great deal of tangible, visible assistance to Bosnia. There was more funding for NGOs and more humanitarian aid. The international community is still a presence in Bosnia; this presence is arguably beneficial to the Roma. One Romani activist told me that while he disagrees with some of the international community's methods of building civil society in Bosnia, he feels that without the international community, the Roma would receive much less recognition and support. He also mentioned a growing Romani movement in Bosnia, one which focuses on NGO development, education of Romani children, and more. This movement appears to be significantly stronger today than it was three or four years ago and part of the reason is due to the encouragement of the international community to design programs for and by Roma. The international community also encourages the government to address the specific needs of the Romani population but there appears to be more barriers to accomplishing this goal than within the private sector.

The relationship between the international community and local NGO sector in Bosnia-Herzegovina is complex. I conclude, at this point, that the presence of the international community is particularly beneficial to Roma. As I mentioned above, stereotypes of Roma are deeply engrained in Bosnian society and without the encouragement of the international community (including international NGOs as well as funding agencies), there is little evidence that many Bosnians would include race or Roma in their notion of building a civil society. Many of the Roma NGOs with which I am familiar are focusing on the education of Romani children, which is very important in terms of building a stronger civil society in the future. However, there is still a noticeable lack of knowledge about the specific needs of Romani women. Romani women continue to be one of the least supported groups in Bosnia; they experience triple discrimination on the basis of race, class, and gender. The program I mentioned above, *Romkinje to mogu* (Romani women can do it), is taking great strides to increase the knowledge of Roma and women's rights - and it is an important step in including Romani women in Bosnia's civil society - but there is still a great deal of work to be done in regards to how race and ethnicity, class, and gender intersect in Bosnia.