



# EU AWARD FOR ROMA INTEGRATION

in the Western Balkans and Turkey



women grassroots activists //  
unknown heroes

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# Foreword

## Johannes Hahn

European Commissioner  
for European Neighbourhood Policy and  
Enlargement Negotiations

I would like to celebrate this third edition of the EU award for Roma integration in the Western Balkans and Turkey, dedicated to “Women grassroots activists, the unknown heroes”.

The topics of previous editions of the award were devoted to two other crucial actors in Roma integration: Roma civil society organisations and Roma youth. This year’s award celebrates a central figure in Roma communities: women. The same Roma women that very often face multi-dimensional discrimination and social exclusion on the grounds of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status and lack of education. As the latest data on education shows, Roma women have less access to schooling than non-Roma women living in the same area, and when compared to fellow Roma males. Contrary to this, evidence indicates that the educational background of Roma mothers has a much more decisive impact on their children’s schooling than the educational background of Roma fathers.

This year’s award commends and empowers Roma women: “Advancing women’s leadership and economic empowerment is an absolute priority for us. We are also consistent in all aspects of all our policies, both inside the EU and in our external action, by promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment, even more in the case of Roma women.”



The award celebrates all those women that, usually in the shadow and confronted with severe difficulties, play a central role in the development of their families and their communities.

Fourteen women from the Western Balkans and Turkey have been selected. This publication presents their achievements, and commends their valuable contribution to the inclusion, integration and empowerment of their communities. These “unknown heroes” represent the future and symbolise all Roma women who drive integration forward. The great commitment shown by these women has already brought tangible impact on the ground and will inspire future efforts to continue their work. Honouring these initiatives, and increasing their visibility and sustainability, helps improving the lives of Roma communities across the Western Balkans and Turkey, and supports them in developing their potential and becoming full players in the wider society.

I am confident that this award contributes to empowering Roma women to evolve from hidden actors of today, to leaders shaping the communities’ of tomorrow.

# Shpresa Agushi

## Kosovo\*

Shpresa started advocating for the rights of Roma women in Kosovo in the beginning of 2000. In 2007, she was elected Executive Director of the Network of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian Women's Organisations of Kosovo (RROGRAEK) – a position she still holds today.


RROGRAEK's mission is to promote and support the rights of women and girls from Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities in Kosovo. This is pursued through the exchange of experience and information, partnerships, networking, research and advocacy. RROGRAEK is part of the Regional Network of Roma Women's Organisations in the Balkans which aims at advancing Roma women's rights not only in Kosovo but also in the entire region.

Shpresa and her network have been particularly involved in preventing child marriages and in reporting domestic and gender-based violence to relevant authorities. She has also encouraged the involvement of Roma women in the fight against violation of their rights, which resulted in an increased number of organised Roma NGOs working for the improvement of the status of Roma women in the society.

Shpresa's recent actions focus on bringing visibility to the issues of Roma women with disabilities, which further contributes to shaping a democratic and inclusive society in Kosovo.



\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.



*"Many Roma women have gained courage to understand and seek the rights that belong to them. Simply, the silence has been broken and the voice of Roma women is being heard in the entire territory where they are active."*

# Elma Arus

## Turkey

Elmas is one of the founders of the “Zero Discrimination Association”. She has led the establishment of community centres for Roma and Syrian refugees and has been conducting studies for five years on supporting Roma communities through social and cultural activities, notably in Şişli, İstanbul and Gaziantep.

Her documentary film called “The Half” showed for the first time the cultural practices of Roma, Dom and Lom communities in Turkey. It illustrated the common problems of Roma, such as social exclusion and difficulties in accessing basic citizenship rights. Along with the awareness raising through films, in 2009 she established the “Zero Discrimination Association” and has acted as its president since then, becoming the first and only Roma woman in Turkey actively presiding an association. The association has launched pioneering work, focused on promoting rights-based social policies, fight against discrimination and social exclusion, and supporting access of refugee Roma women and children to their basic rights.


Elmas has established a dialogue with local public institutions through the “Group for Dialogue between Public Authorities and NGOs for Roma”, which she founded in 2012. She has led the development of a mutual advocacy policy to address social problems of Roma groups.

In 2016, she supported the establishment of a community centre for Roma refugee women and children in Gaziantep, which has provided schooling for 120 children.

In 2017, she initiated a school of politics, which has a very significant impact on the political engagement of Roma communities and contributes to a higher participation rate of Roma candidates in elections.







*"It is extremely important that women express themselves and their problems in the right way and demand a solution to their problems. Actually, one of our biggest aspirations as part of our activism is to turn women into individuals who stand up for their rights."*

# Indira Bajramović

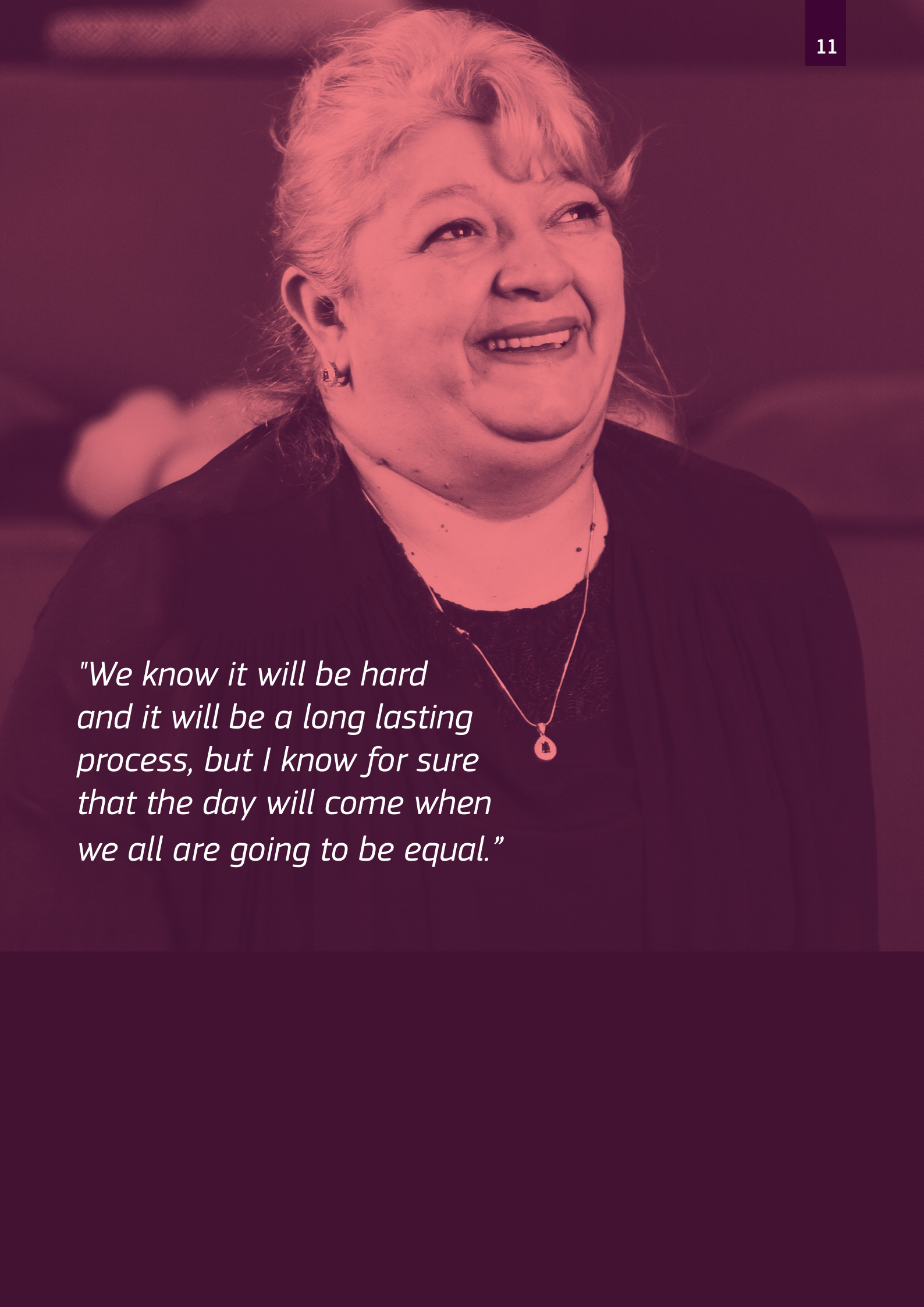
## Bosnia and Herzegovina

Indira is the President of the Roma Women Association “Better Future” based in Tuzla. The mission of the association is to improve the living conditions of the Roma population, with a focus on Roma women, through socio-economic and advocacy programmes.

Indira has actively taken part in several working groups tasked to develop local policies to improve the situation of Roma women. She has also worked on creating partnerships among female Roma activists in Bosnia and Herzegovina and supported the first female Roma network through lobbying and advocacy activities to increase the participation of Roma women in public and political life.

Her efforts have led to the active participation of Roma women in advisory bodies at the highest level, including within the Roma Committee of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through her activities, she has inspired many Roma people to pursue education, start their own businesses, and engage in civil society activities contributing to the identification and resolution of Roma issues.





*"We know it will be hard and it will be a long lasting process, but I know for sure that the day will come when we all are going to be equal."*

# Salija Bekjir Halim

## North Macedonia

Salija is a Roma activist from Šuto Orizari, North Macedonia. She monitors the accountability of the government in delivering sexual and reproductive health services to Roma women in her municipality.

She became actively engaged in Roma integration issues seven years ago, at a time when there was no gynaecologist in the municipal hospital of Šuto Orizari. That is how the “Initiative of Roma women of Šuto Orizari”, a non-formal grassroots organisation working on Roma women’s rights, was established. Its main goal is to ensure adequate healthcare and rights for Roma women by reaching out to decision makers and advocating for such services. In 2012, with the support of the NGO “Health Education and Research Association” she filed a petition to the Minister for Health, in which more than 500 women from Šuto Orizari were calling for primary sexual and reproductive healthcare.

In 2016, she stressed this issue in front of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights in Geneva, which resulted in the Committee’s recommendation to the national authorities to ensure gynaecological services to women from Šuto Orizari. In 2017, a gynaecologist was finally assigned to the municipal hospital. Salija continues her fight to eliminate illegal charges for services covered by the national health insurance.

Since December 2018, she has also been involved in the economic empowerment of Roma women by advocating for the creation of new employment measures and policies at the local level.



*"There are not enough Roma women's organisations; there are just a few of us. Yet, I believe that the woman in our family is the one who should pass on all of her knowledge. The upbringing springs from here, and in some way, the emancipation should stem from the woman."*

# Anita Beriša

## Montenegro


Anita is a young Roma activist and civil servant, who lives and works in the Konik neighbourhood, the biggest Roma settlement in Montenegro.

She has finished a medical high school and later obtained a degree at the Faculty of Economy, becoming the first and only Roma woman in Montenegro doing master studies. Speaking five languages, she started working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011 and advanced in her career to reach the position of first advisor in the Office for European Integration.

As a Roma activist and a government employee, she often acts as a liaison between the Roma and non-Roma communities and the authorities, notably on measures aiming to improve the situation of the Roma community.

She is one of the founders of the Roma youth organisation “Phiren Amenca”, which serves as a platform for activities promoting the integration of the Roma community. The main initiatives that Anita has been involved in are related to education, improved conditions for housing and employment, children rights, healthcare and gender equality awareness. She also wants to establish a movement of female entrepreneurs to economically strengthen and encourage other Roma women to pursue their independence.





*"Through my own example, I want to prove that we, Roma women, can do everything; just like other girls from the non-Roma community, and that education is the key to success."*

# Sanela Bešić

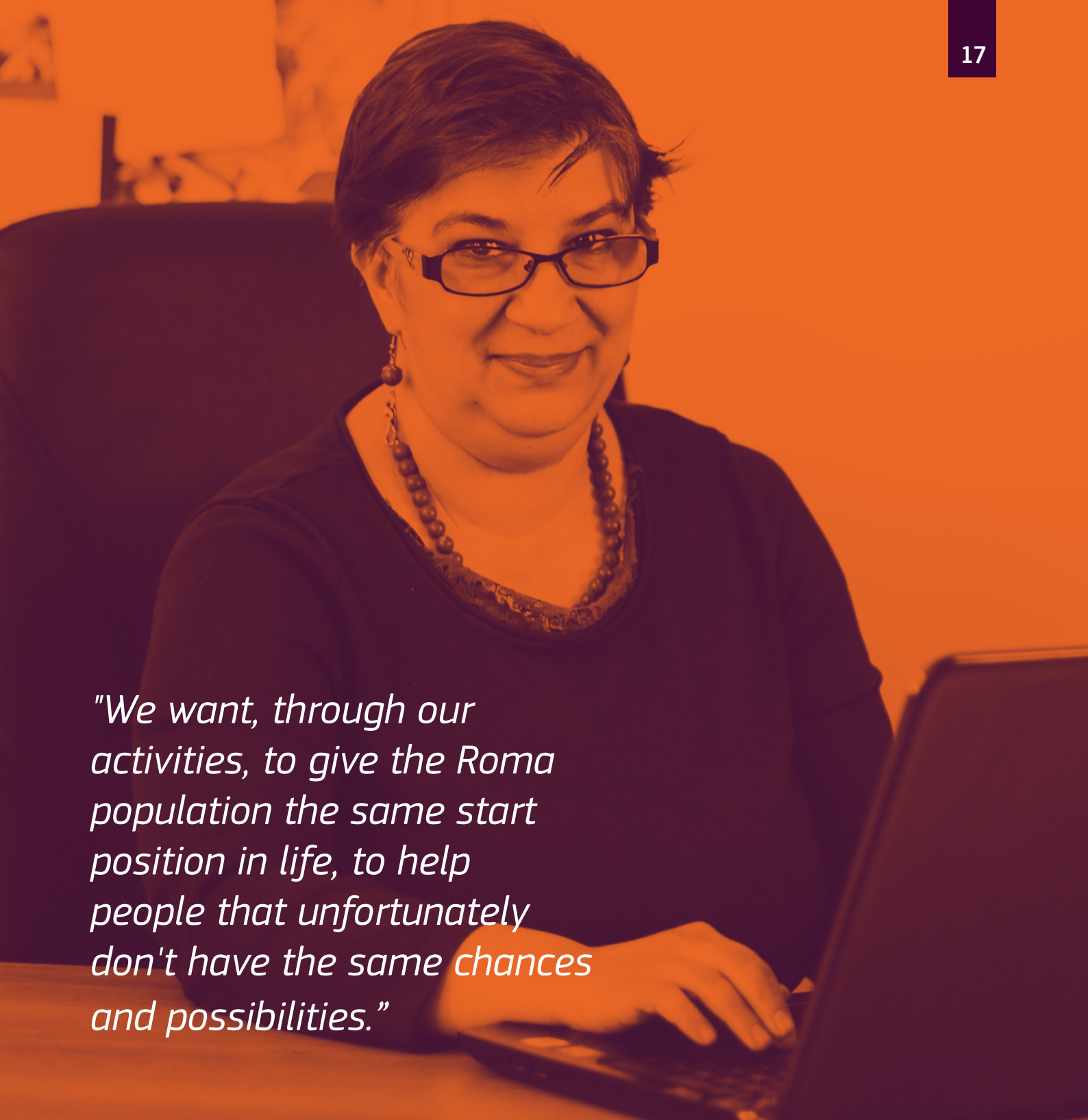
## Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sanela is a Roma woman from Bosnia and Herzegovina who dedicated her life to the fight for Roma population's human rights. She has been actively engaged in the work of the Roma Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Together with representatives of the American Embassy, she succeeded in putting pressure on the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to start officially the procedure of developing Roma related documents (Strategy and Action Plan). Both were adopted in 2008, initiating Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the Decade of Roma Inclusion Programme. She took part in the development of all strategic documents concerning the Roma community, was a member of the Roma Decade Committee Board and is now participating in the implementation of the Regional Project "Roma Integration 2020".

Since 2009, Sanela is also the executive director of the "Kali Sara-Roma Information Centre". The centre has implemented over 50 projects, which were crucial for the social integration of the Roma community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some results over the last three years include housing for 300 families and 300 children starting pre-school education. Sanela also contributed to the establishment of the Romani Early Years Network, which promotes access to quality early childhood care for Roma children.







*"We want, through our activities, to give the Roma population the same start position in life, to help people that unfortunately don't have the same chances and possibilities."*

# Fana Delija

## Montenegro


Fana has fought for the education and empowerment of Roma women since her early childhood. Since 2004, she actively does so on behalf of all members of the Roma community in Montenegro through the Centre for Roma Initiatives, of which she is the executive coordinator. The Centre is the first Roma women organisation founded with the unique goal of creating opportunities to improve the social, economic, political and cultural-educational position of Roma and Egyptian women in the Montenegrin society. The organisation has implemented more than 75 projects combatting domestic violence and child marriages, and promoting education, health protection and economic empowerment.

Fana deals with the most sensitive topics that endanger the adequate integration of Roma women, such as domestic violence and child marriages. In the last four years, she prevented 62 marriages involving underage girls, and facilitated their return to the school system. She provided support in more than 100 cases of domestic violence. She was the victim of three physical attacks during her work to prevent child marriages, but her desire to make a change persuaded her to continue her struggle.

At the age of 33, she enrolled at the Faculty of Philosophy and graduated in 2018 with the highest grade and a resolution to further improve her knowledge and skills, and to show the public, institutions and most importantly, women in her community, that Roma women can be successful.

Fana has so far received two prestigious international awards for her work: an ambassadorial recognition for civic activism from the US Embassy in Podgorica and the Anna Lindh Leadership and Women's Participation Award. Her organisation was also awarded the EU prize for Roma integration in 2014.





*"One of my plans is to continue my education. I will enrol for a master degree, I will continue the projects I am currently pursuing, and I will continue fighting for everything I have stood up for until now."*

# Kendiza Lala

## Kosovo\*

Kendiza is a 17 years old girl from Gjakova. She has been volunteering for more than four years with socially marginalised Roma children and youth in her neighbourhood and in its poorest settlements (Kolonia and Brekoc). Throughout her civic engagement with different local NGOs and student associations, she has consistently promoted empathy, solidarity, tolerance and respect for Roma.

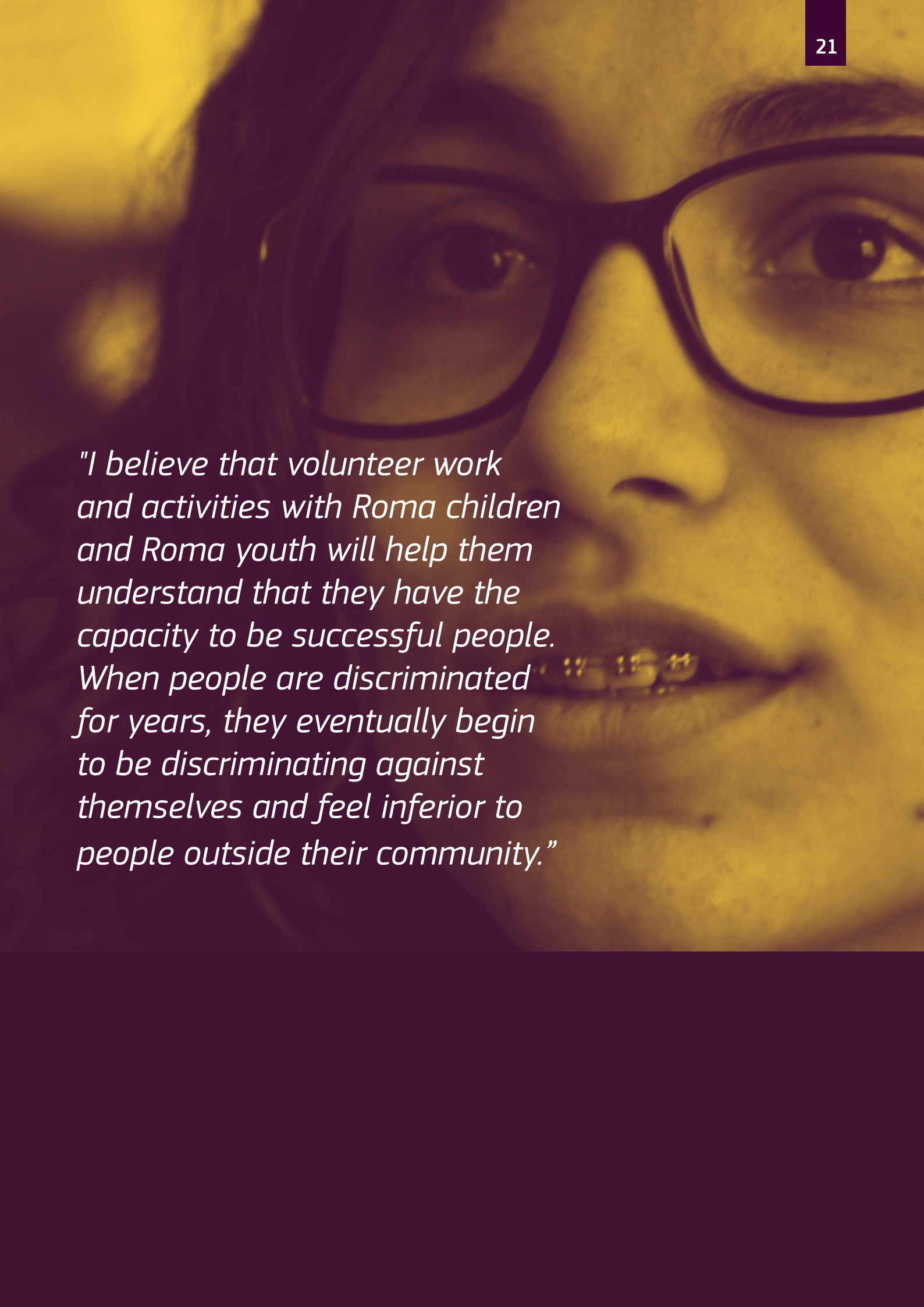
In 2016, she supported the implementation of a healthcare project on health education and personal hygiene in Brekoc and Kolonia. On her own initiative, Kendiza cooperated with a local health department in Gjakova and initiated small group talks about sexual education and sexually transmitted diseases with young women living in informal settlements.

She has implemented different initiatives within her own school, in order to promote Roma culture, reconciliation and to bring Roma and non-Roma communities together. By helping children with their homework and by engaging them in various games and activities, she increases their interest in education and encourages them to obtain better results.

In 2016 Kendiza received an award for her educational commitment by the Ministry of Education. She is a member of the United Nations Youth Task Force gathering young people from diverse communities to overcome ethnic and religious boundaries and act together for more inclusive youth policies.



\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.



*"I believe that volunteer work and activities with Roma children and Roma youth will help them understand that they have the capacity to be successful people. When people are discriminated for years, they eventually begin to be discriminating against themselves and feel inferior to people outside their community."*

# Gizem Nalbant

## Turkey

Gizem is a young Roma girl from the Sulukule Roma community, which is one of the oldest Roma settlements in Turkey. The municipality demolished the neighbourhood in 2007 but the people have not left the district and still live around.


Gizem started attending dancing classes within the Sulukule Roma Culture Development and Solidarity Association when she was 13 years old. She soon became a hip-hop dancer and teacher. Since 2014, Gizem has been working for NGOs, teaching hip-hop dance and running workshops in Istanbul and other cities.

Currently, Gizem is a dance teacher in Acik Alan Association - Çimenev Science and Art Centre, which implements activities for socially and economically vulnerable children to decrease school dropouts. Gizem works with more than 60 children on a regular basis, helping them to build their self-confidence.

Gizem has always believed in the unifying power of dance, especially among the youngsters from different ethnicity and backgrounds. She uses her skills to create a cohesion between young people and also to create a space for young Roma girls and boys where they can express themselves.

She has become a popular figure in mainstream media, breaking down the prejudices against Roma people. In her interviews, she explains the situation of women in Roma communities and, by referring to her life, she encourages women to change and seize life opportunities.





*"If you are a woman, you have already started the game from -1. For everything. Like the dance. When I dance, I don't do it for anyone else, or for a man. I dance for myself."*

# Meleqe Rrënja

## Albania

Aged 71, Meleqe has worked for five decades for better integration of the Roma community, after becoming the first Roma teacher in Albania.


Her initiatives are numerous, but the reduction of early marriages and support to the education of Roma girls allowing them to complete basic education and pass to the secondary level, and, in some cases, enter a university, are among her major achievements.

She also helps her community with civil registration, accompanying and assisting families without civil status. In addition, she offers counselling and mediation services to community members who have applied for social housing or have suffered from evictions. She also helps her community members with health care procedures.

She is the President of the Organisation "Tomorrow's Roma Woman" and she recently opened a kindergarten for the Roma children in Berat.





A woman with short dark hair, wearing a dark jacket and a patterned scarf, is smiling. She is positioned in front of a banner that features the Albanian text "Gëzuar" and "Në Rom". The banner also includes a logo of a hand holding a heart and some smaller text that is partially obscured.

*"My message to all the Roma women in Albania is that the Roma woman should not be afraid of life but should fight persistently, willingly, and get an education because this is the way to achieve everything."*

# Ana Šaćipović

## Serbia

Ana is the Director of the Association of Roma Women “Osvit” based in Niš. The association focuses on raising awareness among Roma women, and within the entire Roma community, about the importance of their involvement in social, economic, educational and cultural life. “Osvit” also aims to prevent and combat violence in Roma families by empowering women to break the cycle of violence and to influence the public and decision-makers to create a non-discriminatory society.

In 2005, she set up the first SOS hotline in Romani and Serbian languages for Roma women and children who became victims of violence. This important initiative is accompanied by educational workshops and street actions to promote the recognition and prevention of violence in partnership relations. The association also monitors the work of local institutions and issues recommendations on public policies contributing to the improvement of the situation of women and Roma women.

Ana is also the author of the programme “Support for the improvement of the position of Roma women”, which contributes to better quality of services provided by the local institutions to Roma women in order to exercise their rights.

Since July 2018, Ana is the President of the “Management Board of the Roma Women’s Network of Serbia”, which gathers 27 Roma women’s organisations.



*“A long road still lies ahead of us. It is a process when you are changing the awareness of a Balkans nation, saying that the woman’s place is to be equal with the man. That the Roma women belong there with other women regardless of their ethnicity, level of education, social status. Our laws vouch equal rights for everybody. There is still a lot to do until the time - and I believe that moment remains far away - when we can say that we are all genuinely equal.”*



# Nesime Salioska


## North Macedonia

Nesime is a long-term human rights activist from North Macedonia and the executive director of the Association “ROMA S.O.S.” The work of the association is based on the principles of solidarity, justice, human dignity, equality of rights and diversity and the focus is on vulnerable and marginalized groups, in particular on Roma.

Nesime’s most important achievements are having introduced measures to eliminate child marriage through changes in the legislation. She has recognised that the most pressing issue for Roma women is the tradition of arranging formal or informal marriage, with girls as young as 16. In order to eliminate this harmful practice, she has become one of the strongest human rights activists and has engaged with a variety of stakeholders.

Her work has led to the submission of amendments and additions to four laws (criminal code, family law, law on primary education and law on secondary education) to the relevant Ministers and the Parliament. The impact of her work was confirmed with the adoption of amendments to the Criminal Code in December 2018, which raised the legal age to cohabit in any kind of marital arrangement to 18.





*"My dream is that every girl gets to complete at least secondary education, that every girl gets married after the age of 18 and has an opportunity to get employed and to integrate on an equal basis with the other inhabitants from her own community."*

# Brisilda Taço


## Albania

Brisilda is a distinguished Roma professional, who has been contributing to the improvement of the living conditions of Roma in Albania for over 15 years. Brisilda is known for her spirit of activism and solidarity. She supports Roma communities at the local level and establishes a balanced institutional approach with public authorities. She has achieved direct and tangible change in fields such as access of Roma communities to education, housing, healthcare and registration.

More specifically, she has assisted Roma families in obtaining access to social housing programmes and helped them find a solution to the common problem of the lack of electricity due to inherited debt. She has kept the Roma community informed about the available employment programmes, mammography visits and child vaccination.

Brisilda has also contributed to the empowerment of Roma communities in Tirana, with a focus on women. Nowadays, most of them are well known as Roma women activists. She has acted as a facilitator in the municipalities of Elbasan and Vlora in the framework of the joint programme of the European Union and the Council of Europe “ROMACTED”, which aimed at enhancing democratic participation and empowerment of local Roma communities and at improving and expanding the institutions' commitment, capacities, knowledge and skills in working for Roma inclusion.





*“Unfortunately, we have many young Roma mothers who cannot write and read and this is because of the mentality that prevented them for attending school or for economic reasons. My dream is that one day these women and young girls will learn how to write and, why not, have a stable job. I think that this would favour them to be part of the Albanian society.”*

# Slavica Vasić

## Serbia

Slavica is an activist and a co-founder of Roma Women's Centre "BIBIJA" established in Belgrade in 1998. The mission of the centre is to strengthen the position of Roma women in the society and the visibility of Roma women's rights, including the right to education, to a free choice of partner, to employment and to adequate health care services. "BIBIJA" is also committed to addressing the issue of violence against Roma women and of early marriages in the Roma community.


Slavica has been particularly involved in the social integration of women from multi-marginalised groups. She has contributed to raising the visibility of marginalised Roma women in the labour market, but also to drawing public attention to the prejudices and stereotypes against Roma women and other marginalised groups. She has been particularly committed to helping girls in pursuing their education.

Slavica also participated in the development of several strategic documents related to gender equality and to the social inclusion of Roma men and women. She continues to monitor public policy in those sectors.

In addition, she is one of the founders of the "Roma Women Network" in Serbia and an active member of its management board. Through public advocacy, the network promotes the recognition of Roma women as important actors in the public and political scene of Serbia and encourages the participation of Roma women in decision-making processes at all levels.







*"My true award are the girls, the young women who managed to make a change in their lives. I can already see changes in some of the younger girls; the most important thing for Roma women or girls is education. We want to cut down the number of early marriages, we want Roma girls to be educated, we want them to be like all other women in Serbia."*

