

1. A story of Christina (Krusevac, Serbia, 2017)

A young lady in her early 20s, accompanied by her cousin, showed up one day in our office in Romani Cikna –Roma Women NGO in Krusevac, Serbia (CARE's partner in the FAIR II project).

Christina looked insecure, modest, neatly dressed, with a thick black hair pulled up in a pony tail. She started telling us her life story in a low voice, slowly, like somebody who really is not used to talking about herself. She was pregnant and seemed to be due shortly. The look in her eyes was covered with a shade of sadness though.

When she was 11 her mother sold her to a man from Novi Sad. She lived there with him for eight years and became a mother of four. The marriage started with him raping her and continued with everyday violence. He was a drug addict and would beat her and the children all the time. When there was no money in the house she and the kids were forced to go out in the street and beg. She knew nobody and had no one to turn to for help; she did not know what a normal life should look like and accepted her reality as her destiny. One day however, she realized she was sick and tired of his violent behavior; she took a knife and was determined to protect her life and the lives of her children. He ended up seriously injured and she ended up in court. She had no legal help at that time and had no idea what to say and how to defend herself during the court proceeding. She never mentioned being sexually assaulted and continuously harassed by him. As a result of enduring violence for years, she kept silent all the time. Not once was violence mentioned during the court process. Christina was sentenced to one year in prison for attempted murder.

After she served her full sentence, she left her husband and the three children and fled with the youngest one to her aunt living in Krusevac. After a short period of time she met there a nice man of her age who accepted her and her child and she moved in with him to a settlement Trebotin near the town of Krusevac, which is a Roma settlement of five-six run-down houses with no electricity, water or sewage. Christina had joined a multi-generation family of ten members and she got pregnant very soon after that. In the meantime, her former partner had complained and as a result the second instance Appellate Court convicted her to an additional three year sentence.

Romani Cikna's mediator in the community (trained and engaged through the FAIR II project), Jasmina, found out about Christina and her problem during a regular community visit and had agreed with Christina that she would come to the office in order to assess the situation and find ways to help her.

Christina's life story was extremely sad and she was crying while telling us about her childhood, often not being able to find the right words to explain what was going on and how she felt. Her father had died while she was still a little girl and she lived in poverty with her mother, brothers and sisters. She never went to school, she had to stay home and help her mom with household chores. Her mother arranged for her to get married and got some money in return while Christine had no idea about that at all. As she put it, the life with her mother was hard, but it turned into living hell in her new home.

With help of our legal advisor we decided to put together a request for deferring of the three year sentence on the grounds of her pregnancy and the need to stay with her three year old child. The request was supposed to be filed with the Municipal Court in Krusevac next morning. However, due to the high stress level Christina went into labor that very evening and had a baby at home, before the emergency team arrived. On the next day, Jasmina – the mediator, managed to get an appointment with the Court President and explained to him Christina's situation and personally filed the request. After one month, Christina was informed that her sentence is being differed for one year, which we consider a great success under the given circumstances.

The intervention of the mediator and the support of the entire organization has enabled Christina to spend one year with her children and her family. She said it gave her new wind under her wings. In our case, we from Romani Cikna were happy and sad at the same time. It is so unfair, all that she had to go through and the fact that we could not turn back time and start the court proceeding from scratch in order to have it based on the principle of justice and fairness. In any case, we intend to be there for Christina and her family and support them in any case possible during the period to come.

2. A story from Veliki Crljeni, Serbia

My name is I. N. and I live in Veliki Crljeni with my wife, two sons, two daughters in law and two grandsons. I am the only one working. My wife and I take care of the first grandson, since he is our sons child from his first marriage. We've just enrolled him into the pre-school in our town.

Our family problems started when our son got married for the second time and got his second child. His wife was constantly on the go, coming and going and leaving the little granddaughter to us, so we had to watch both of the kids. I know that there is no excuse for my behavior, but due to the tense situation at home and the lack of money, I would get very nervous and yell at my family. One time the things got out of control and I slapped my daughter in law. She reported me with the police and before I could understand what was going on, I was put in jail. I spent 30 days in the central prison and I thought I was in hell. I could not believe what had happened to me. I was thinking all the time about my family, 'how are they doing without me, what if I get fired, who will be taking care of them?' They let me go after a week in prison since my daughter in law changed her statement from having beaten her to the true story.

Back home it all hit me, I got depressed, I could not explain nor talk to anybody about how I felt. The kids were in my way, I just shut down.

One day my wife asked me to accompany her to a workshop on mental health and I said 'yes' more out of curiosity. There was a female doctor talking and describing each and every symptom I was struggling with. I did not want to bring anything up, there in front of all the people, but I could not believe, I had them all. All of a sudden I could not keep quite any more, I got up and confessed in front of everyone there, I told them that I was convicted due to family violence and that I needed assistance.

The doctor booked an appointment with me and it has been two months now that I visit her on a regular basis. I also attend all of the workshops that the Roma Women Centre Veliki Crljeni holds. I am a changed person, there is no more yelling at home, no fights and nervousness. I've realized that I was a cause of tension and fights. I enjoy spending time with my grandchildren again, we play together and go for walks, and I am back at work too. I talk to my friends about this I tell them how much better I feel now; I listen to them and try to help with a piece of advice if solicited. I also tell them how much better I feel now, I listen to them and try to help with a piece of advice if solicited. I also tell them to go and ask for help and expert advice if they should feel down.

3. A story of Suzana, Veliki Crljeni/Lazarevac, Serbia

I am Suzana Radosavljevic, I was born in 1985 in Veliki Crljeni. I live with my husband and four children, my mother, younger half-sister and an older half-brother who is intellectually disabled. I lost my father when I was little and we lived in poverty, so my mum got soon married again. I did not attend school on a regular basis and I got married when I turned 13. My husband was 15 years old then. I had my first child when I was 14. Since we both were really young, both of the families were helping us as much as they could. At the age of 19 I already had four children. We were living of social welfare and my husband Vladan would get a short-term job here and there.

In 2008, I met the women from the Roma Women Center who invited me to come to a workshop. It took them a pretty long time to make me come, I honestly thought that I did not have time for such engagement and I had nobody to leave my children with. On one occasion they told me to bring my kids and I gave in. The kids were given a drawing set and they were busy and enjoyed themselves and I could relax a bit and take part in the workshop. That was first time in my life that I heard other women talking about their lives, but not only about taking care of home and children, but also about how to find time for herself. The whole atmosphere was relaxed, we had a coffee and it felt more like a chat with girlfriends. The time flew. After many years I had time to enjoy my coffee in peace and talk to women like me. I was thrilled, and that was a trigger for my change. I wanted to know when the next workshop was planned, I could not wait to meet with these women again. Ever since I have been a regular member and participant on all the workshops; I've learned a lot about reproductive health, contraception, that there was an ombudsmen for protection of human rights and gender equality and one for protect the right of patients, I've learned about the importance of education. At one workshop I was asked this question: 'Would you like your daughter to live a life like yours?' I very quickly said NO. I realized then that I have to send all of my children to school, not only to be educated, but also that

school would help them become good and honest people. We still were not much better off than before, but I made sure my children do not miss a day at school. A big help to us was assistance we would get from the Veliki Crljeni organization, a set of free books and school supplies, clothes etc. They also helped my children enroll in high-school through the affirmative action. We left for Germany but had to return after a while and they helped my son Gabriel with the translation and acceptance of school diploma from there and the enrollment process. We left for Germany after six months of living in a camp since we had lost our home in the 2014 floods.

Now, even my children take part in the organization's activities and attend very useful workshops held there, on non-violent communication, fighting prejudice and about benefits of finishing school. They've made friends there who are not Roma too. My Gabriele and Tomislav took part in the peer educations on engaging men and boys and they liked them a lot. My daughter Jamina has finished primary school and with help of the organization 'Bibija' from Belgrade, she also finished a course for a cook and is now working in a restaurant. Gabriela is a 3rd year high-school student and her hobby is dancing, while Tomislav is in the 1st grade of high-school and plays football. The youngest daughter Snjezana attends 6th grade and we are already discussing which high-school would be best for her. We are now waiting to move to the social apartments built by ECHO from Novi Sad and the Lazarevac Municipality, we are eligible and on the list thanks to the Roma Women Center.

When I look back and how far we've come I can say that I am a satisfied and happy woman, I think I am a good mother too. I'm not sure I would have managed it all by myself, we all need some support and encouragement in life in order to take a higher road. Lucky for me, I did get this kind of assistance when I needed it most and I will never stop being grateful for that.

4. A story from Prnjavor, BiH

T.P. is 30 years old, always smiling, happy and full of life. She appears to be self-confident, strong, she is tall and blond, nicely dressed, looks like a Hollywood star. But, life has not been very nice and generous to her, what she has managed to leave behind resembled more a night mare than anything else.

Today, she's renting a place in a mixed community and it can be said that she is not a typical Roma woman we are used to seeing in closed Roma communities. She is divorced and in the court process against her husband, fighting for a custody. Moreover, she is not a typical Roma woman since she has a job, wears high heels and wears fashionable clothes and goes out to have a coffee with friends.

She now lives in Prnjavor, she moved here from one small town when she got married. She used to live with her husband and a mother in law and became a mother to a girl and a boy, she was unemployed and her family and their home were her life, not really caring about how she looked like, it was not important. She was always there to comfort her husband when he would come home from work tired and in a bad mood. No matter how hard she tried to be a good wife it did not work, he would use every opportunity to treat her badly. Since she had finished school back while she was still with her parents, she asked her husband to help her get a job at the company he worked for, and he did. Since she could not go to work in trainers she would dress nicely, she was liked by her colleagues and loved her job, and that is when the problems started.

Her husband's disrespect turned into violence very soon, he would call her a whore and accuse her of being unfaithful to him. She would run home straight from work to take care of the kids and his mother and he would visit bars and come home drunk. She believed that only if she would try harder to be a better wife, all would be well. Now she cannot believe what she was putting up with. He would not care if there was food at home, he only cared to have money to buy alcohol. With time, it got even worse, he would take her out on the balcony during night and beat her up there, not to wake up the kids and his mother. She never talked about it with anyone, not even her parents. As she put it:

'We all pretended that nothing strange was happening, I just stopped meeting with my girlfriends for a coffee, they stopped calling me not to annoy him. I realized that my husband was sick with jealousy and that I should not go out by myself at all. Very soon I became used to weighing every word and every move, thinking of what he might think and interpret it, I was sure that whether I would get beaten or not depended on me and my behavior.'

One night, after she was left alone covered in blood and bruises, she decided to leave, barefooted, in her pajamas, she just left, went back to her parents, started taking huge amounts of anti-depressives and was missing her children. She then decided to go back to Prnjavor and look for help, she wanted

to see her children. In the Center for Social work where she went first did not believe her story, she had no fresh bruises to show them, she had no medical track record since she had never visited a doctor after to report violence. Social workers have accused her of being an irresponsible mother for abandoning the children. She was scared, depressed and was not sure what to do, she could not go back to work since her husband was still working there.

Then she heard about some Roma women association and a mediator that is very kind and helpful with everyone and she decided to try out that option, she had nothing to lose. An what happened? It was the first time that somebody listen to her story and really believed her. They offered her free legal and after that a psycho-social assistance. It has helped her a lot, to start trusting again and seing positive effects of her efforts. She was even offered to volunteer in the association and it felt great to be able to help others. However, she still had doubts about her future, if she would ever be able to start anew. The Romani Cej staff invested a lot of time and effort into making her start believing in herself again. After a while, they even engaged her a small project and she made some money, for the first time after quite a while, she rented a room and started a legal battle to get her kids back.

It was not an easy period, but with the continuous support of the mediator and the association, free legal assistance and an attorney to represent her in Court. The first decision was in her favor, and that was a huge relief, however, the husband filed a complaint and the case was back to square one. Since she had no steady job and a place of her own, her husband won the legal battle. However, she feels stronger and more determined than ever to change that. She has found a job and a bigger apartment and she is preparing to start the custody process all over again. And as we said at the beginning of her story, she is now in a much better place and is sure that the verdict this time will be in her favor. As she put it: I am tired, but strong enough not to give up!