

INTERVIEW WITH A ROMA WOMAN LIVING IN HOMELESSNESS IN BRUSSELS

To truly understand the barriers encountered by Roma people and respond appropriately through legislation, it is first necessary to listen to their lived experiences. FEANTSA's Simona Barbu and Sergio Perez have interviewed Felicia (pseudonym), a Roma woman experiencing homelessness in Brussels. She explains how she and her family have come to be in this situation and the concrete barriers preventing her from participating in society fully.

It is a cold November evening in Brussels and we walk down the main shopping street in the city centre. All shops are closed, we are in the middle of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic. There are not many people on the street as the curfew starts in a couple of hours. Suddenly, we see three young girls running around. Behind them there are around ten other people, adults. They are clearly getting ready to go to bed as they have laid down what seem to be mattresses and blankets arranged under a shelter that should cover them from rain.

The girls speak Romanian to each other and I say hello. When they hear I speak Romanian, people get curious immediately and raise their heads from their improvised beds. They all say hello and look curious. Felicia (pseudonym), a young woman in her mid-twenties comes closer and introduces herself while the girls run around us. We introduce ourselves as well, and we tell her we work at FEANTSA and would like to ask her some questions for our magazine which aims to present the situation of Roma sleeping rough. The girls look up attentively, while we talk to Felicia who agrees to let us tell her story under anonymity.

FEANTSA: Is this where you all sleep?

Felicia: Yes, we have been sleeping here since we arrived in the city, a week ago. I am here with my husband and the others are our relatives too; the girls are my nieces. They are here with their parents. We sleep here together. In the morning, we clean after ourselves and we put the foam mats we sleep on and the blankets behind the building, so that we can collect them in the evening. We don't have enough money to pay for rent here, it's expensive... (the wind blows and she looks to the street and continues) It's cold and it's hard to manage, but it gets really bad when it rains...

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FEANTSA: How old are you, girls?

The girls answer all at once: 8 and 9 years old.

FEANTSA: is it your first time in Brussels?

Felicia: No, I was here last year, but then I got pregnant and had to go home. Now I have a 10-month-old baby. I left him and my 5-year-old daughter in Romania with my parents.

FEANTSA: And how do you manage now, especially with the coronavirus? Do you use the social services in the city?

Felicia: No, we used to go to Samusocial [shelter for emergency aid to homeless people], but now we don't go anywhere. We are afraid to go to the shelters to be honest, because of this virus. There are many people there usually and we don't think it's safe to be inside with a lot of people. We have masks, somebody gave them to us from the pharmacy close by here, for free. It is difficult, and now with the restrictions, the stores are closed and the toilets as well, so we can't use the public ones anymore. You know, as a woman it is very difficult not to have a place to wash up, but we manage as we can, we have to...

FEANTSA: *Have you been told that you have to quarantine when you entered in Belgium?*

Felicia: No, nobody told us anything about that.

While we talk to Felicia, the girls ask if we have any clothes. We explain we do not, but we can try to ask if any shelters give clothes for children. After calling one of the shelters in the city, we explain that they would have to go there to get help, including clothes, and Felicia looks a bit confused. When we try to explain that it's not too far from where they sleep, Felicia explains.

Felicia: I don't know, I need to ask their parents, because they are not my daughters, and you know how it is, you are not allowed to have children on the street. There was another Roma woman who had her daughter with her and the Belgian state took the girl. So people who have children here are scared to be seen by authorities.

FEANTSA: *And what do you do here, how do you manage?*

Felicia: We beg, to tell you the truth. I ask people for spare change, but I don't insist and I don't like to make people feel obliged, they should give only if they want to. Now it's not going so well since this virus appeared. Some days I make only 5 euro. It's bad compared to before. Everything is closed, and people don't give so much money. But we still need to come here, because in Romania there is nothing for us. You know, we are Roma, and there aren't many opportunities for us there to get a job. It's difficult for men back home as well, but as Roma women it is even harder... It's hard to get an education and then sometimes we are being told that we are 'g*psies'... When it's possible we work daily jobs for the other people in the community, but it's not enough to earn money to support our families. And I have two children at home, the little one needs his bottle of milk every day. I need to send money to them. This is why we came here.

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FEANTSA: *And how do people treat you here, did you have any problems?*

Felicia: They treat me fine. I also know some Romanians who help me sometimes. We didn't have problems with the police or anything. I think we will stay here for one month at least, because we also need money to pay for the bus ticket to go back to Romania. It's 100 euro per person.

FEANTSA: *Do you know that there is a Roma strategy at European level which allows for countries like Romania to implement activities to improve the situation of Roma in the poor communities?*


No, what is that? They should help us? No, that never happened, especially back home in Romania. Maybe here. Yes, Belgian people give us some money, but we didn't get any help from elsewhere and especially not in Romania.

FEANTSA: *What message would you like to send to the institutions here in Brussels working at European level to improve the situation of Roma through our magazine?*

Felicia: We need jobs, but jobs that we can work here, so that we can support our families and to have a roof over our heads when we stay here. We need a place to sleep when we get here. I would like to wake up, go to work like everyone else and then have a place to come back to, a home and a bed to sleep in. I want to work here in Belgium, as the salaries are better.

While we speak, the spotlights from the mall under which the group of people is gathered go off - it is getting late and even the few essential stores that stay open during the pandemic are closing. We all look up since the lights turn off suddenly, and Felicia's face turns into a smile as she comments in Romanian: "*S-a luat curentul, n-am plătit factura!*" [The electricity is off, because we didn't pay the bill!] and she chuckles.

Felicia has a positive attitude; she is strong and resilient and finds the strength to make jokes despite the prospect of having to spend at least one more month on the street. Her thoughts always go back to her children at home, telling us how she calls them every day from the mobile phone which she charges in a shop inside the metro station. She feels sorry she does not have enough battery to show us photos of her kids, but asks us to come back again to talk and she will show them to us then. She waves and says good night, returning to the aligned foam used instead of mattresses where the young girls are braiding each other's hair getting ready for sleep.

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