

# Voices from Portugal



***“If the project was not here, we wouldn’t do anything.”***  
**Roma woman**

## Associação Para o Planeamento da Família: The VIHQUINHA Project

***This case study is one of a series of qualitative reviews called “IPPF Changing lives” which capture the stories of IPPF’s beneficiaries and clients from around the world. A rapid PEER (participatory ethnographic evaluation and research) approach was used to train project beneficiaries to interview people in their social network. These voices provide us with powerful testimonies on lives changed - in some cases, lives saved - and illustrate how IPPF is making a difference.***

Roma law governs gender relations, marriage, and family life. Girls are taken out of school when they start menstruating. Their social relations with others are closely monitored to safeguard virginity and ensure marriage within the ethnic group. Girls are married by Roma law from about 14 years onwards. They become housewives and start having children from this point on. Cultural norms influence women’s access to SRH information and services. Even after marriage, girls receiving SRH consultations are accompanied by their mothers.

Through Project VIHQUINHA, the Portuguese Family Planning Association (APF) is working with inhabitants of the Biquinha Estate in Porto’s Matosinhos district to improve access for Roma families to SRH information and services. It has become a model for good practice in establishing relationships built on trust and support with Roma communities. Roma suffer widespread discrimination, and many in Biquinha face poverty and unemployment.

The VIHQUINHA project focuses on preventing HIV transmission and promoting SRH, personal and social skills, and the prevention of drug abuse. Activities include facilitating educational and play groups for children and young people, and information sharing and educational groups for adult women and men on topics such as parenting, SHR and health and hygiene. Street campaigns have been undertaken to distribute information about SRH and condoms.

<sup>1</sup> [www.options.co.uk/peer](http://www.options.co.uk/peer)



***“I like the Association because of family planning. I learned things about family that I had never heard about.”***  
***20 year old Roma male***



## Achievements

One major benefit of the project has been in building a sense of community among Roma families, who initially felt very isolated and fragmented after being uprooted a few years ago from woodland camps, where they lived in extended family units, and being rehoused on the estate. The 500 Roma in Biquinha Estate live in two central blocks and comprise just 8.3 per cent of the estate's entire population. This new sense of coming together has been developed through project activities, especially the group and information sharing sessions. The project has also helped in resolving disputes between families, and has facilitated more harmonious living between both Roma and non-Roma neighbours.

The project has also provided the opportunity to the Roma community to build up a relationship of trust with a professional and caring team. The APF office is situated in the heart of the Roma blocks. The trust built up by the project staff has now made it possible for mobile teams to carry out HIV voluntary counselling and testing on the estate. Now, trusting few other institutions, they call on the APF team for all kinds of assistance.

Another major achievement of the project is that both adults and children have learned useful and valuable information. In particular, women stressed adult literacy, the opportunity to learn about family health and being able to support their children's education as major benefits of the project. The Roma involved in the project highly value the information they receive on SRH, HIV and AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, hygiene, children's nutritional health and dental care. The integration of themes, and the fact that children and adolescents are often present when information is given to relatives, made it easier for family groups to openly discuss topics relating to sexual health and contraception.

The educational benefits of the project have also extended to young people. Young Roma value learning about contraception and HIV, and some have gone on to take up internships at APF. Furthermore, the activities organized

for young people have enabled them to come together, enjoy each others' company, express themselves, have fun together and most importantly through this, increase their self-esteem. These activities have also contributed to behaviour change among young people, building in them a greater sense of respect for their peers and neighbours.

The lives of Roma have also changed through their increased access to government health services. This is primarily due to the project team's pivotal role in promoting beneficiaries' use of health services. Project staff assist Roma in filling out forms, making appointments, reading test results and utilizing health services in general. The team has succeeded in overcoming several barriers to accessing services, including building trust with health care providers. APF has also worked with mothers to build their confidence and awareness to enable them to allow their daughters to have SRH counselling before and after marriage.

A further gain has been in addressing the gender norms that dominate the patriarchal family structure. In particular, women's participation in the project has increased, and they have shown more autonomy in decision making. As a result, women have become progressively more willing to allow their children (including teenage daughters) to come to the office and receive SRH information. One project staff member explained what it was like before the project: "In 2005, girls and women had no say whatsoever – if they could even come to the project, use family planning, go to the doctor – it was all decided by men."

Finally, some adolescent girls have entered into discussion with staff on matters of early marriage and education. A few have even begun to negotiate with their parents to have more years of study, and a delay in marriage plans.

## Challenges

Gaining the trust of the Roma has been challenging. Roma are marginalized from the wider Portuguese society; traditional beliefs and laws are viewed as intrinsic to their cultural survival and, as such, the influence of 'outsiders' is strongly resisted. APF staff efforts have been highly successful but getting to this stage has taken considerable time and effort, and a great deal of tact and sensitivity. The initial groundwork in gaining the trust and confidence of the Roma has also impacted on the speed with which outcomes can be attained.

The project staff have had to strike a sensitive balance between respecting the traditional beliefs and laws of the Roma, and introducing information and ways of thinking that can easily be perceived as contradicting or challenging Roma culture. This has meant that staff have had to be deeply empathetic towards the Roma while at the same time also working to achieve improvements in health and wellbeing in conjunction with their professional roles. Achieving this often means introducing new concepts or encouraging behaviour change that can be seen as threatening to Roma culture. New challenges can result in temporary rejection, or dismissal, of earlier achievements.

The highly patriarchal and insular nature of Roma society has meant that Roma men have appeared to be more resistant to change and less willing to actively engage in the project. This has limited the amount of progress that has been achieved, particularly in terms of women's ability to access health care.

Dependence on volunteers was also described as an increasing difficulty. The commitment of the volunteers was highly respected among project staff, but they also perceived dependency as making the project vulnerable if and when volunteers are unable to provide their current levels of support.

## Lessons

The main strategy used to reach this group has been the adoption of a highly empathetic and very personalized approach to establishing trust and mutual respect between the Roma community and project staff. Effectively building trust within this community proved to be a time-consuming yet essential strategy. The project staff relinquished a desire for rapid outcomes, focusing instead on providing family-oriented support using a culturally appropriate approach, which has enabled them to build up trust and work with women, girls and children who would have been the most difficult to reach.

One of the most important strategies that APF has used in this context has been its open-door policy in the Biquinha office. The team's almost unconditional emotional and social support to the community has earned them the trust they need to pursue longer-term project objectives.

The project has been successful thus far because it has not tried to force change or criticize Roma cultural norms and gender taboos. The team's strategy is not to criticize Roma way of life, but to offer alternative models that may be gradually adopted. On early marriage, for example, the project coordinator explained, "They have very early marriage and we don't want to interfere - but give them the ability to make a choice."

APF's cautious and patient approach to addressing culturally challenging issues such as HIV and SRH, coupled with an underlying basis of trust and understanding, has enabled them to provide the Roma community with numerous benefits to their health, education and community cohesion. More importantly, it has successfully allowed the project to increase access to SRH and HIV services to Roma inhabitants of the Biquinha Estate.

***"The people of the neighbourhood have been helped by the project in matters about health and matters about AIDS, TB and sex among other things."***

***Roma man***



***"It was a very closed community before the project came. Closed to the outside world."***

***Roma woman***



***“They teach us things we didn’t know before. It’s very nice. Whenever we need a favour, they are there and they help us.”***  
***Roma girl***

Portugal	
<b>Country context<sup>1</sup></b>	
Population (millions), 2010	10.7
Adolescent fertility rate (women aged 15-19 years) (births per 1,000 women aged 15-19), 2008	16.5
Life expectancy at birth (years), 2010	79.1
GDP per capita (USD, PPP), 2008	23,019
<b>Context for Roma in Portugal<sup>2</sup></b>	
Estimated number of Roma living in Portugal, 2010	40,000-60,000
Estimated proportion of Roma in Portugal that live in precarious housing conditions (%), 2010	31.0
Proportion of recorded cases of racial discrimination complaints that resulted in a fine (%), 2000-2006	1.1

<sup>1</sup> UNDP, ‘Human Development Report 2010’. <<http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/PRT.html>>. Accessed on 10th January 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Collective Complaint: European Roma Rights Centre v Portugal (2010), (Website, accessed on 14-05-10).



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The International Planned Parenthood Federation is global service provider and a leading advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. We are a worldwide movement of national organizations working with and for communities and individuals.

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