



## FIRST PERSON Young Mother Charts New Path

### A Roma woman's journey from poverty to empowerment



Photo: USAID/Jay Sorensen

Teaching assistant Narcisa Cumpana now feels at home in a classroom in Bacau, a city in northeastern Romania.

***“When I first saw the class of little children, I wanted to cry. I felt something was broken in my heart. I had seen these kids begging on the street, and now they were in school,” said Narcisa Cumpana, a young mother who became a teaching assistant.***

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The first of eight children, Narcisa Cumpana was forced to marry a young man at the age of 16. Four years later, she found herself alone with two little daughters. “I lived with my parents,” said the young Roma woman. “Sometimes I begged and sometimes I collected metal. With the money I got, I bought my girls milk and bread.”

“When I was 23, my mother heard about a new program at the soup kitchen. When I went for the first time, the social workers told me they would help me get a job and send my kids to kindergarten.”

In 2001, Narcisa became one of the first graduates of a USAID-sponsored training program for poor mothers in Bacau, northeastern Romania. She transformed herself from a beneficiary of social services to an active contributor. The project, *Gata, Dispus si Capabil*, or Ready, Willing, and Able, is designed to improve living conditions and educational opportunities for severely impoverished families.

In Romania, many of the country’s poor are Roma, or Gypsy. In addition to financial hardship, the Roma face widespread discrimination. *Gata, Dispus si Capabil* offers children educational and social support and helps parents — especially mothers — gain the tools they need to provide for their families.

Narcisa now carries herself with an air of confidence. After completing a series of teacher trainings, she became a teaching assistant at a *Gata, Dispus si Capabil* school. Her training as a community health advisor and classes in English have given her a sense of empowerment. She helps children and families that she identifies with. As a local health advisor, Narcisa teaches her community about family planning and other health issues. At first, she said, “It was very hard to talk about such subjects, but I know that if I share this information, maybe I will save some lives.”

In addition to her two jobs, Narcisa is now finishing high school. “It’s hard,” Narcisa admits. “In my class I am the only Gypsy, and I feel like I have to do something to prove myself to the others.” But she is a strong student, and plans to attend college to become a qualified teacher.