



European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights

Country
Albania

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2002-2003

Funding
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Results
Improved knowledge among Roma girls on their history and customs

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Proud to be Roma

Raising awareness across the generations

The Roma community comprises Europe's largest ethnic minority. Although the estimated 7 to 9 million people is more than the populations of many European countries, many of us are surprisingly ignorant about the life style, traditions and history of this group of people.

To better integrate the community into an expanding European Union, it is essential that there is understanding, trust and tolerance among the Roma people themselves. So, a micro project funded under the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) set out to make 200 Roma women (aged between 13 and 30) living in the suburbs of Tirana aware of their rights as a minority group, and to instil in them pride in their history, culture, languages and – most importantly – in themselves.

One step at a time

The project was carried out in three stages: preparation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. The team's initial contact with the girls and young women revealed a high level of illiteracy and ignorance. This has been attributed to various socio-economic factors including poor living conditions, discrimination within the education system (by local teachers and pupils alike), limited language capabilities, and a tendency by the young women to try to escape these problems by getting married and having children of their own at a very early age.

During the training sessions it became apparent that the majority of these issues stem from deeply rooted problems specific to the younger generation of Roma. The girls had little awareness of their culture and traditions and, feeling uncertain of their specific roles and place within such a society, lacked self-esteem and self-trust.

Back to the beginning

The project team set out to inform the group about the history behind the origins of Roma traditions, the intention being to foster in the girls feelings of love, pride and respect for their



culture and language. By learning more about Roma heritage and customs it was hoped that they would be encouraged to improve their linguistic and writing skills, both of which are essential if they are to have the means to understand and practise the customs themselves, as well as to instruct future generations. This approach was also intended to improve relations between the generations, with the young women going to their mothers and grandmothers for information, guidance and advice.

Problems past and present

Many of the problems relating to past customs and traditions still have a serious impact on today's community members. Prejudices and discriminatory practices have prevailed and there are huge issues, such as women's rights, domestic violence, education and child marriage, from which Roma females in particular continue to suffer badly. A recent study by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia revealed that many Roma girls and women have a very poor understanding of sexual and reproductive health, resulting in higher rates of sexually transmitted disease and very high birth rates. In fact, the team found evidence to support such claims throughout the training, often encountering young women who were victims of domestic violence, poor health and living conditions, extreme poverty and unwanted pregnancies.

Leading the way

As a result of this EU-funded initiative, which was a follow-up to a previous study carried out among Roma girls and young women over a two-year period, a further project was set up. Funded by the World Bank, it aimed to improve the leadership capabilities of Roma women by helping them to self-organise. The end result was the creation of the Roma Women's Forum, the first NGO of its kind in Albania, and a partner in this European Initiative.

With help from this NGO and other organisations, such as Save the Children Fund and Tirana Maternity, the young girls and women in this part of Tirana have been given the necessary know-how and support to be able to improve their own lives and those of generations to come, while respecting the customs and values of the Roma community as a whole.

