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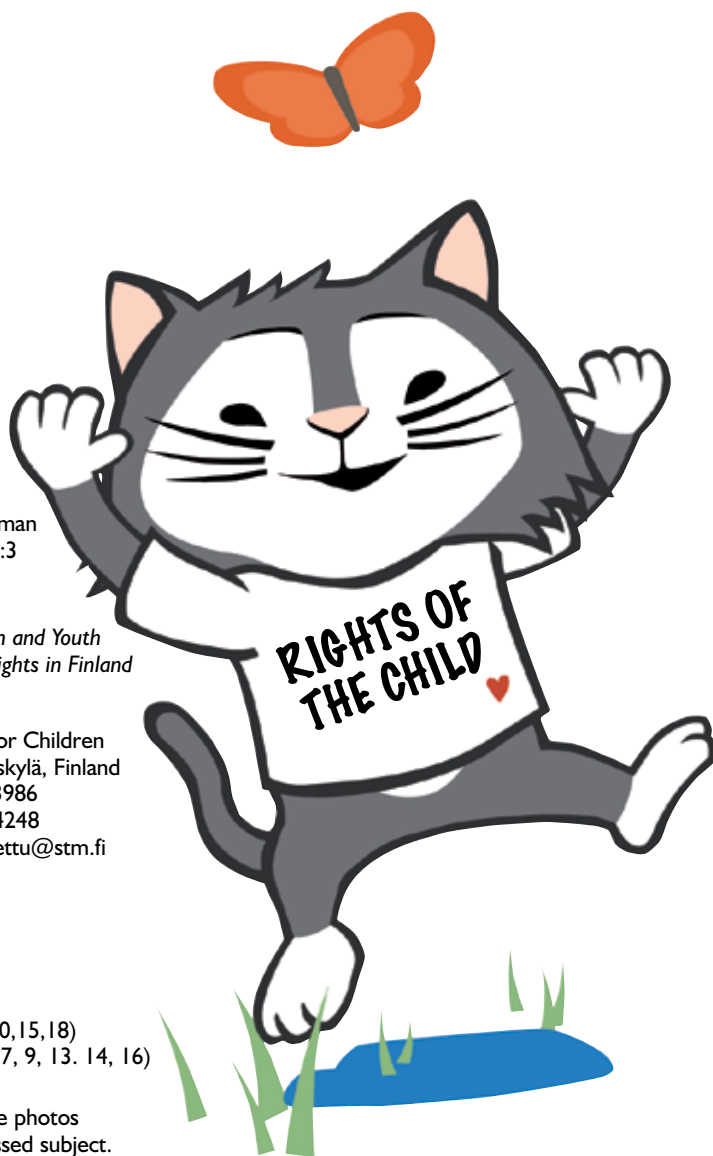
More Similar than Different

Sanna Tawah

The Welfare of Roma Children and Youth
and the Realization of their Rights in Finland

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Foreword

■ This article focuses on the welfare and rights of the Finnish Roma children and youth. It is based on a research report conducted under the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in Finland. The Ombudsman for Children, a position currently held by *Maria Kaisa Aula*, works to increase awareness of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Finland. The UN Convention specifically states that a child belonging to a minority group has the right to his or her own culture, religion and language.

The Roma are a traditional ethnic minority group in Finland, their history dating back to more than 500 years ago. However, very little research has been carried out on the wellbeing and status of the Finnish Roma, and even less on the welfare and rights of Roma children and youth. Therefore, the research report in 2009 on the rights and welfare of Roma children was important and timely. The research was conducted by researchers *Pekka Junkala* and *Sanna Tawah* from the Department of History and Ethnology at the University of Jyväskylä. The study was based on qualitative interviews with 36 Roma children and youth between 10–18 years. In addition, seven Roma parents and adults working with Roma children were interviewed in order to get an overall picture of the lives of Roma children in today's Finland. This article discusses the main findings of the report. It concludes with suggestions on improving and strengthening the welfare and rights of Roma children in Finland. ●

History of the Roma in Finland



Roma are the biggest minority group in EU member states; they number between 8–12 million people. In addition, another four million live in the Balkans and Turkey.

Roma are a heterogenic group with various traditions, languages, customs and cultures. They are anything but marginal in numerical terms, but their low socio-economic status, poverty, low education levels and high unemployment rates have placed them in a marginal category all over Europe. What is common to all Roma groups in Europe is that they suffer from racist attitudes of the mainstream society. Social exclusion and discrimination are an everyday occurrence in Roma people's lives. It is the Roma children who usually are in the most difficult situation.

The Finnish Roma commonly belong to the Kalé Roma group living primarily in Finland and Sweden. The history of the Finnish Roma dates back to 500 years ago – the first groups of Roma settled in Finland in the 1500s. In Finland the Roma were persecuted during the 16th to 18th centuries, they were treated as outlaws and excluded from many functions of society. Currently, the Finnish government estimates that around 10 – 12,000 Roma live in Finland. In addition, a significant number of Finnish Roma, between 3,000 – 4,000 people, lives in Sweden. However, the exact number of Roma population in Finland is not known, because people are not officially classified according to their ethnic origin. (National Board of Education, OPH 2004, Finnish Roma 2004; Romano Missio).

Finland gained independence in 1917, but the Finnish Roma were given official citizenship status only in 1919. The Finnish Constitution guarantees equality for all its citizens, but as a minority group, the Roma have always lived in the margins of society. A special amendment to the Constitution was made in 1995 which secures the right of ethnic minorities to maintain and practice their culture and language. (Valtakari & Syrjä 2008). In Finland the Kalé (Kaale) Roma are often referred to as “mustalaiset” (pl). The term is however considered offensive; in a literal sense “mustalainen” (sing.) means “a black person” or “blackface”. The Roma generally use the term among their own group, but when used by the wider Finnish community the term is considered as a racial insult. A more appropriate and approved term for general usage is “romani”.

Like other European countries, the history of the Roma in Finland has been a history of rejection, discrimination, persecution and forced assimilation (Markkanen 2003, 43; Nygård 2001, 98; ROM-EQUAL 2007, 6). In the mainstream society and education Roma culture and language has not been much appreciated. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the astonishing story of cultural survival in the extremely challenging environment, which the Roma history, Roma culture and the current way of living of the Roma portray.

Since the 1960s, efforts have been made to improve the status of the Finnish Roma; that was the time when major structural changes took place in Finnish society leading to the disappearance of the traditional occupations and livelihoods. Special attention was paid to finding solutions to housing issues. The 1970s brought education and employment into the forefront. Targeted vocational training was offered to Roma, which to some extent increased their participation in the job market. However, the earlier experiences of persecution and exclusion of the Roma community, and later the policies of forced assimilation, have contributed to their isolation from the mainstream Finnish society and keeping their community relatively closed. (Valtakari & Syrjä 2008).

The small but close-knit Roma community can be accredited for the survival and maintenance of Roma culture in Finland. However, the Romani language has played an important role too; it has had an immense significance in creating and reinforcing Roma cultural identity. Traditionally, it was a means of communication within the Roma groups and kept secret from the mainstream society. Through the language the Roma identified themselves as a group separate from the mainstream society, but also as part of their own group.

However, the use of the Romani language has been drastically reduced since the World War II; nowadays the youth rarely learn the language naturally at home. And it is only fairly recently that Romani language teaching has been included in school curricula; the first courses in Romani were offered in the 1970s. The language has been offered as an optional subject for Roma pupils in elementary education only from 1989, and in upper secondary schools from 1999. (Lindberg et al. 2004, Granqvist 2006: 4; Åkerlund 2006: 29). According to a report by the Ministry of Education (OPH 2004), only 8.5% of Roma pupils took part in the Romani language lessons. The numbers are low, mostly because the Romani language lessons are not offered or accessible in every school with Roma pupils, despite the Governmental recommendations.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health set up an Advisory Board for Gypsy Affairs in 1956. The name was changed to the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs (Romaniasiaian neuvottelukunta, RONK) in 1989. The responsibility of the Advisory Board is to enhance and increase equal participation of the Finnish Roma population in society, to improve their living conditions and employment opportunities, disseminate information on Romani affairs, and to ensure that Roma culture and Romani language are taken into account in daycare and in preschool and basic education. Since 1998, the Advisory Board has set up Regional Advisory Boards on Romani Affairs (ARONK) to oversee Romani affairs in their assigned area together with the Regional State Administrative Agency. ●



Roma Childhood Now and in the Past

Roma culture is very social and interactive.
Roma families are extended families and include a large number of aunts, uncles, cousins and 'step-relatives'.

■ In the 1970s it was not uncommon to encounter a Roma family with 7–9 children. Nowadays the number of children has been reduced to 2–3 children, which is approximately the same level as in the mainstream population. Women's responsibility and pride has been to look after the home and the children under school-age. The children are treated equally, but in teenage years a distinction is being made between gender roles. Most Roma children are bilingual; however the use of Romani has considerably declined in Roma homes in recent years. (Blomerus 2006).

From the 1950s onwards the state removed several Roma children from their parents and placed them in state institutions, generally on the basis of poor housing conditions. It is estimated that every third Roma child grew up in a state institution from the 1950s to the 1980s. This created distress and a feeling displacement for the Roma children who grew up in children's homes intended to forcefully assimilate them into the mainstream culture, as well suffering to those Roma families who lost touch with their children for years. This is still an open and largely untouched issue in the Roma community, as well as in the wider Finnish society, but it explains to a great extent the general distrust the Roma commonly show towards officials belonging to the mainstream population, such as social workers, police and other authorities.

Roma youth and young adults generally start families much earlier than the mainstream population. Family brings other kinds of responsibilities, which often push aside school and further education. Adult education has grown in importance among the Roma, as they want to continue their studies when their children are big enough and their family situation allows them to return to school. ●



Roma Homes and Ways of Living



In the past, the Finnish Roma had a nomadic lifestyle. Traditionally, the Roma made their living from trading horses, animal husbandry, making and selling handicrafts, and performing music.

Nowadays the Finnish Roma live settled lives, but wandering has remained an inherent part of the Roma way of living (Markkanen 2003: 82–86). Earlier, their roving lifestyle served a purpose of securing a family’s livelihood, but today, its social function has grown in significance. The term wandering (“kulkeminen” or “kiertäminen” in Finnish) is still widely used among the Finnish Roma, but nowadays it serves a purpose of leisure travelling, visiting distant relatives and keeping up family ties. The interviews with Roma youth indicate that “wandering” also serves an important function in the lives of Roma youth and young adults in their process of becoming independent from the parents.

The housing situation of the Finnish Roma is today noticeably better than that of the Roma population living in many other European countries. In Finland the Roma are not segregated to any special sites, as is the case in many Eastern European countries. The Finnish Roma generally live in municipal apartments, as well as in privately owned flats and houses. However, the living conditions of the Finnish Roma are poorer in comparison to the majority of the Finns, and the Roma face discrimination in the private housing market and even in governmental housing schemes, despite the Government’s efforts to improve their housing conditions.

The private homes of the Roma which the researchers visited were abundantly decorated, neat and generally well-kept. The Roma preferred antique-look furniture, heavy mirrors with golden frames, leather sofas, porcelain figures and statues, as well as paintings and photographs depicting their family members. Plastic flowers were placed in porcelain jars. Also, Christian symbols and angels were popular items on shelves and walls. Curtains were decorated with lace, and carpets were colourful. The children were always neatly dressed, as well as the adults; the Roma women were generally wearing their traditional Roma dress. The dress includes a heavy ankle-length black skirt made of velvet and an elaborately decorated lace blouse with long sleeves. The blouse can be of any colour or a mixture of colours, and accompanied with golden jewellery.

The dress is distinct from the clothing of the mainstream population, and thus Roma women wearing the traditional dress are vulnerable to discrimination and prejudices in public places, in access to employment and services.

The interviews with the Roma children and youth for the study were conducted individually in their homes, schools and language clubs. Nearly all of the children lived with their parents and other siblings, but there were some living with a single parent and, in addition, there were a small number of youth who lived in a youth home. The interviewed Roma children and youth were mainly average pupils at school, some performing fairly well, with few exceptions of poor school performance. The diversity of the children's backgrounds gave an overall picture of their everyday life.

Most of the interviewed children and youth had lived all their lives in their current community of residence and were hoping to continue living there. They lived in small cities, towns and communities outside the capital area, and they were satisfied with their current living area. The small communities and towns were valued because of a social control of the Roma community; the elders will know what the youngsters are doing. The children maintained that a good place of living is one without discrimination and fear. One 17-year-old girl described her home municipality as following:

“ This is a very good place. There is not that much racism here than in some other places. I can live here in peace. I don't need to be afraid. I like it very much.”

In comparison, the capital area of Finland was criticized by the Roma youth, many having relatives or friends living there. Some of them had also lived there for short periods of time. The youth stated that the Roma community in the capital area suffers a greater number of problems in relation to the smaller towns. The problems they listed included disrespect for Roma values, drug and alcohol abuse and lack of social control. A few of the children had also lived in Sweden, but their experience was nothing but positive. They explained that the Finnish Roma face “double discrimination” in Sweden, as they are not fully accepted among the Swedish Roma, nor are they accepted by the mainstream Swedish people.

The interviews indicated the importance of family ties and networks in the children's lives, which are of paramount importance to their wellbeing. The Roma are very family-centred people and enjoy social lives. This became evident during the interviews; the Roma homes which the researchers visited were clearly spaces for encountering, sharing and being together. It was not uncommon that there were other relatives and friends coming and going during the interviews. The interviewed Roma children stated that they have large families and that the boundaries of their homes are flexible, the doors being open to any friend or relative, whenever a need arises.

The children and youth described that they do “ordinary things” at home in the same way as other young people. They enjoy being with their families, meeting relatives, watching television, playing indoors and outdoors. Young people also help their parents with domestic chores; especially the Roma girls help their mothers. That is considered a natural way of learning household tasks and the Roma rules of cleanliness and symbolical purity. Some of the families kept horses and it was generally the boys who helped their fathers or uncles with horse care and equine management, as well as taking part in horse racing events. Traditionally, Roma families have had somewhat strict gender roles, but nowadays it is not uncommon for boys to help with household chores or girls to participate in sporting activities generally pursued by boys, such as football. ●

Daycare and Education – Way to End the Cycle of Exclusion?

There has been great concern about the schooling and education status of Roma children amongst the government and various Roma organizations in Finland.

■ The Roma children have perplexed the Finnish primary and secondary education system based on mandatory attendance, rules and common regulations. Education is compulsory for all in Finland, and it has been extremely uncommon for the main population to drop out of basic education. However, in the past, the Roma generally had different values towards education than the mainstream population. Roma children have been reported having problems in adapting to school environment, skipping school for long periods of time, ignoring homework and sometimes being unfamiliar to the basic school routines. Even today, Roma children have higher drop-out rates and they repeat grades more often than children of the mainstream Finnish population. Furthermore, previous research conducted among the Roma in Finland has shown that the Roma children have relatively seldom attended daycare and preschool, which further widens the education gap between the mainstream and the minority. (OPH 2004).

There are several reasons for the nonattendance of Roma children in daycare and preschool. Roma mothers have tended to stay at home, it is a pride for a Roma mother to look after her children without external help, which kindergarten and daycare are considered to be. Home care has been valued in Roma culture. To some extent the Roma have been suspicious of the daycare and preschool system and officials, and it is only during the past 20 years that they have started using childcare services. Also, a fear that their children are being bullied and discriminated against has prevented their participation. As many Roma people are unemployed and stay at home, they have preferred homecare. As for any child, Roma children have considerably better chances of succeeding at school when they have adequate cognitive, social and motor skills from preschool education, and similarly a lack of those competencies puts Roma children in an unequal position at school age in relation to the mainstream children. (OPH 2004, Romano Missio). ●



Roma Children at School – Obligation or Possibility?



The interviews with the Roma adults indicated that although education was not on the priority list of the Roma parents in the past, things have been rapidly changing during the past decades in the Finnish Roma community.

More Roma children are now attending daycare and preschool, fewer children are entering formal education unprepared, and Roma parents are increasingly concerned about their children's education. There has been a realization that schooling and education can open doors in society and secure a livelihood. Previously, the Roma did not trust the Finnish education system, the reason being they have witnessed that education does not eradicate discrimination in the job market.

However, more Roma children are placed in special education and special classes in comparison to the main population, sometimes for ungrounded reasons. There are several reasons for transferring a child to special education, but one fundamental reason is underachievement. This became evident from the interviews; some of the Roma pupils did not perform in school as well as they could have performed, mostly due to a lack of interest or adequate support. The question is two-fold: it is also the preschool and school professionals who would need more knowledge of the Finnish Roma culture and working with Roma pupils. For example, some Finnish Roma children are bilingual and not necessarily fluent in the language of instruction; therefore they are not familiar with the terminology and expressions used at school. The bilingualism of Roma children has been often ignored or seen as a handicap in school, while the bilingualism of for example immigrant pupils has been taken into account better than that of the Roma. Sometimes teachers do not have adequate understanding of what kind of support the Roma pupil would actually need in order to perform better in the studies; this also leads to a lack of commitment to the success of Roma pupils. The easy solution is to transfer the Roma pupil into special education.

As mentioned earlier, this study is based on interviews with Roma pupils who have done fairly well at school. Most of them, 34 out of 36, had attended preschool, which according to them had eased the transition from preschool to primary school. In general, the children were excited to start primary school, but worried about possible bullying.

Unfortunately, the anticipation of school bullying turned into reality in many cases, especially in the first grades of primary school. The Roma children and youth reported very high numbers of school bullying, their bullying percentages differing radically from those of the mainstream pupils. In percentages, 42% of the interviewed Roma children and youth said they have never witnessed or experienced bullying, 39% reported experiencing occasional school bullying, while 19% of the interviewed pupils stated they have experienced continuous and severe bullying at school. Luopa (et.al.: 2008) studied the occurrence of school bullying among 82% of all 8th and 9th grade pupils in Finland during the years 2006–2007. Their results indicate that 8% of those pupils experienced re-occurring and continuous bullying at school. The interviews with the Roma pupils suggest they experience two times more bullying than pupils of the main population. According to the responses of 36 pupils, 19% of Roma pupils experienced grave and continuous school bullying. However, it must be noted that the interviews with Roma children included both primary and secondary school pupils, unlike Luopa (ibid.) who studied only the 8th and 9th grades of secondary school.

The types of bullying the Roma pupils experienced varied from verbal bullying to social alienation and physical bullying. The verbal bullying included name-calling (such as “manne” and “mustalainen”), making offensive remarks and jokes about Roma ethnicity and the pupil’s family background, and sometimes verbal threats. Indirect bullying included social alienation and excluding Roma pupils from the group. Boys experienced more physical bullying than girls and boys also got involved in fights. The Roma pupils reported school bullying to be one reason for skipping school and missing classes.

Why did bullying then continue remarkably long, without anyone taking action against it at school? One reason why the bullying continued without interference was that teachers failed to recognize the signs of bullying. Further, it generally took a long time before the Roma children took courage and informed teachers about bullying and called for help. The children were afraid that they will suffer even more because of the teacher’s intervention in bullying. There were few cases in which the children had managed to stop the bullying by their own means, but most of the bullying cases needed adults to take action against bullying. For the children, the teacher’s intervention was a huge relief and helped to stop bullying. The interviewed children stated they felt their concerns were taken seriously and they were listened to by teachers and educators. The children stated the school officials generally dealt the bullying cases very well.

The interviews revealed that bullying is more severe in the primary school level. This calls for early intervention in bullying and sensitizing Finnish pupils to Roma culture and people from an early age. Another important observation based on the interviews is that there was little, if any, bullying in schools which had Roma classroom assistants or other educators with Roma background. It appears that the presence of Roma adults in school environment sensitizes other pupils to Roma culture, gives needed confidence and support to Roma pupils and prevents bullying.

The Finnish government set up a special Romani Education Unit in 1994 under the Ministry of Education. The Romani Education Unit works with several national Roma associations to implement and influence national educational programmes. Its aim is to create equal opportunities for Roma to participate in basic and vocational education. The Finnish government has made a provision for the teaching of Romani language at schools. According to the Romani language policy, Romani language lessons can be offered at schools with at least four Roma pupils. However, despite the recommendation, the municipal authorities are not obliged to arrange Romani language teaching in their schools, and for financial reasons most of the municipalities have not opted for the teaching. A lack of finances, lack of qualified Romani language teachers and, also, a lack of good will stand as impediments to Romani language teaching.

The Kalé dialect is on the verge of extinction in Finland, therefore it would be imperative to let the future generations know and learn this traditional language. Those interviewed pupils who participated in Romani language lessons were very satisfied with the language teaching. Most often the lessons are arranged after school hours, one or two times a week. Despite the extra homework and longer school days the Roma pupils enjoyed the language teaching and valued it very high.

“ *Romani language lessons are much nicer than other school subjects.*”

– 10-year-old boy

“ *It would be great to save our language tradition. Not many people can speak it nowadays.*”

– 16-year-old boy

“ I have learnt Romani language quite well at home; I have also studied it from these language books. In our community the teaching is quite good, but the younger pupils, unfortunately they have no basic knowledge of the language.”

– 18-year-old boy

It is also a challenge to make majority students and teachers familiar with Roma history and culture. The pupils stated that their school curriculum does not include any aspects of Roma culture and history, despite Roma being a traditional minority in Finland and its roots deep in Finnish society. The earlier persecution, forced assimilation and taking Roma children from their parents are also completely ignored subjects in school about Finnish history and society.

A 16-year-old boy describes:

“ Maybe in the history books it is shortly mentioned that we have come to Finland or something like that.”

In relation to a lack of understanding Roma culture, another 16-year-old boy described:

“ There was a case that the school employed a Roma assistant, so it happened, for example I was in the school cafeteria with my coat on, and we had quarrels about that with the teachers, I told them I cannot be without my coat in the presence of an older Roma, that it is your fault if you have employed an older Roma person. I just could not be without the coat. The teachers could not understand and we quarrelled often about that.”

The above description calls attention to the traditional dress code of the Roma which is an essential part of their culture. In primary school children wear children’s clothes, but in the secondary school the youth have to follow certain dress codes. For boys it means neat black trousers and a jacket, and for girls a long skirt and a blouse, accompanied with a specific kind of jewellery and long hair. For instance, some of the Roma girls of secondary school age described how they wear double layers of clothes: In the morning they put on jeans and a top, which they cover with a long black skirt and a blouse. When they reach school, they wear “normal clothes” (referring to the latest youth fashion), that is they take off the outer layer of the skirt and the blouse, but before returning home they again cover their jeans and the top with the long skirt which is more appropriate for young Roma girls to wear in the presence of their parents and other older Roma people. It appeared that some Roma girls change clothes according to the context, some wear what other youth are wearing, and some wear the above mentioned combination of the black skirt and the blouse. The Roma girls generally make a decision to start wearing the traditional full Roma dress between the ages of 15–20 years.

The interviews revealed the importance of the transition stages in school. Successful transitions from home to daycare, from daycare to primary school, from primary school to secondary school, and from secondary school to further studies are all of paramount importance to the wellbeing of Roma children and youth. The Roma children will need support, encouragement and role models in the transition stages. For example, the challenge the Roma youth face in their process of becoming independent in secondary school and after is twofold: they not only need to find a place as youth among their own age-group, but they also need to find their place as Roma youth in their own community.

The Roma youth have also often witnessed unemployment of their parents and other relatives, which may to some extent discourage their future employment wishes. Therefore, study counselling and career guidance are essential for the Roma youth, as well as positive role models and external support. It was encouraging that the interviewed Roma youth stated they have received adequate study and career counselling from secondary school and vocational institutions; they were generally satisfied with the guidance services. ●

Social Networks, Mobile Lives and Pastime Activities

The extended family and vast network of relatives play a significant role in the lives of the interviewed Roma children and youth. They keep daily contact with extended family members and relatives by visits, phone calls or through the internet.



The Roma children and youth generally had a wide circle of friends among the majority population as well as with other Roma. Some had more Roma friends while some had more friends among the mainstream population. The internet allows the Roma children to create their own virtual spaces and networks for friends and relatives. Many Roma children have family members living in Sweden, and the internet was their main means of contact with distant relatives. The Roma youth use instant messaging services and spend a considerable amount of time on the internet. Mobile phones are another service which the youth utilize a lot in their daily lives. Even during the interviews their mobiles were continuously beeping or blinking on a silent mode.

The Roma children of primary school age participate in various sporting activities, children's clubs and other activities organized by their municipality of residence or local church. Local Roma groups also organize language clubs for children, which the children greatly enjoyed. However, Roma language clubs were few in number, especially in communities with less Roma population. The children were hoping to have language and culture clubs. The children stated they feel free to be among themselves. Friendships are very important to Roma children and youth, but they grew in importance at secondary school age. Many of the earlier hobbies, such as sports, were abandoned and the youth spent their pastime mostly with friends. This is common to all teenagers. The youth stated that they are not much interested in their earlier hobbies and they rather spend their pastime with friends. It was generally Roma girls who discontinued their earlier hobbies, especially sports such as dancing and horse-riding. However, those Roma boys who spent their pastime at horse stables and were interested in horse trotting, continued their selected path with the horse care, and many were hoping to become professional in equine training and management. The youth between 16–18 years were concerned about the state of the younger Roma teenagers and expressed their worry about a lack of youth workers and services targeted specifically to Roma children.

Most Finnish Roma are Protestant Christians, but many belong to the Pentecostal Church and to the Evangelical Free Church. Christian religion played a major role also in the lives of the interviewed children. It was general that the whole family go to church events together and, in addition, many Roma youth participated in Christian youth clubs and events organized specifically for youth and young adults. ●

Roma Culture and Identity



The Roma children and youth expressed a strong Roma identity tied to their culture, community and traditions. They also had a strong Finnish national identity due to their long history of living as a part of Finnish society.

Language was one central theme discussed in the interviews. As mentioned before, their mother tongue was generally Finnish, and only few of them were able to speak fluently a Kalé dialect of the Romani language. Others had some knowledge of the Romani language, but many did not speak it more than few words. They had learnt Romani language at home, at Romani language classes at school, and language clubs.

According to them, the strength of Roma culture lies in its world-scale uniqueness and in the sense of being one community. It was often stated that “being Roma comes from blood”, that is being born to Roma parents and living in Roma culture. Another main reason given was “being Roma comes from heart”, which means knowing the traditional Roma cultural rules by heart, respecting them and living in harmony with others. The threats to the Roma culture mentioned by the youth were the decline of the cultural norms and values, disrespecting them, and sometimes even inventing new rules which are taking the Roma culture to its extreme. As a 16-year-old boy describes:

“ It has been slowly becoming, let's say it has become like Euro-Roma, the youth have abandoned some of the fine values and replaced them with some bad things. It would be great to keep the fine ones, that is what the elders have been trying to talk to them and to explain what Roma culture really is, so that those youth would not go and invent their own rules.”

As mentioned earlier, the status of Roma people has always been different from that of the majority of the Finns. Discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, religion or language was criminalized in Finland in 1995 but the Roma continue to face discrimination in their everyday lives.

In addition to previously mentioned housing and employment markets, the Finnish Roma face discrimination in access to licensed premises such as shops and restaurants. This was not uncommon for the Roma children and youth, who reported various everyday encounters with the majority including suspicion and prejudices. Outside their familiar and known environments such as schools and local areas, the children sometimes faced name-calling on the streets and prejudiced practices in access to shops and shopping malls. They faced suspicion in shops where the Roma youth and young adults were often followed by security personnel while inside the store, stopped at exit and their pockets inspected.

The reason why the Roma children and youth identified the prejudices and discrimination is the main population's lack of knowledge of Roma culture. There are many Finnish people who do not personally know any Roma and therefore are not acquainted with their culture. The lack of correct information and knowledge, and sometimes a lack of interest and understanding, create tensions between the main and minority population. The youth also felt that Finnish media write and report of the Roma people in a negative tone and with little respect for Roma traditions and ways of living.

However, the children and youth also described successful encounters and everyday experiences with the main population. The Roma live inside and side by side the Finnish culture, with which they also affiliate themselves. As the children described, "we are more similar than different" in relation to the main population. It is encouraging that the Roma have friends both inside the main population and their own, and in addition, in many immigrant groups in Finland.

“ Like some say, I don't want to be Roma, because I can be freer if I live like the mainstream people, saying that they have more fun and we have all these rules, but the rules are not preventing us to live our lives. It is really up to the person and also that the Roma would come out and go to work, so that they would not be hiding in their corners, they should just come out from their hiding.”

– 14-year-old girl



Discussions with Roma Adults



The discussions with Roma adults and parents highlighted similar issues as the Roma children themselves brought up in the interviews.

■ All interviewed Roma adults were working with children either in school as classroom assistants and language teachers, or in language clubs and in kids clubs provided by various church nominations. Their occupations and placements have given them firsthand knowledge on the situation of Roma children and youth in Finland.

The Roma adults shared a general concern for the future prospects of the Roma children and youth: what kind of education and employment opportunities their children will have? How does the future look like for the Finnish Roma? The Roma adults were concerned about the disappearance of the Romani language and vanishing of Roma traditions, and cultural changes brought by the contemporary changes in society. Some changes were welcomed by the adults, but some, such as failing to show respect for Roma elders were not welcomed.

The Roma adults stated that Roma children are doing relatively well in small and middle-sized communities which have traditionally established and close-knit Roma groups. However, those small communities are not necessarily very multicultural, Finland traditionally being a homogenous country. Therefore, the Roma face discrimination in employment and other areas of life. Things have been changing with the arrival of a growing number of immigrant population; Finland has changed from a relatively homogenous nation to a multicultural country in a short period of time. Interestingly, the Roma adults stated that it was only the arrival of immigrant and refugee groups to those communities that finally opened the eyes of the municipal leaders and politicians to see multicultural issues. While the equal and fair treatment of immigrants is being highlighted in decision-making and policies, its significance is only limited to immigrant groups at the same time as the municipal leaders fail to see the discrimination the Finnish Roma still encounter in their everyday lives.

The Roma adults emphasized the importance of Roma school assistants and other educators. Their presence in schools gives confidence and a feeling of security to Roma children, who are in the minority in the school environment.

The Roma classroom assistants have even a bigger role in secondary school, when the youth need to make decisions for their future education. Through their own example and experiences from working life, the Roma adults can guide and support the youth to make achievable choices for their future studies. Furthermore, schools would benefit of primary and secondary school teachers with Roma background, but to attain this, more Roma young adults need to be encouraged to aim for higher education and university degrees.

The Roma school assistants also serve as an important linkage between school and Roma parents. For some Roma parents, it is easier to approach another Roma adult in school matters. However, some Roma parents might feel that things are being taken care of when Roma adults are present in the school. This does not, however, lessen the responsibility of the Roma parents over their child's schooling.

“ We need to remember that the kids are at school only some 25 hours in week, that's the time the kids spend there, and the rest they spend with their parents. So the responsibility is always pushed on the school, but it is the parents who should carry the main responsibility for their children and youth.”

– Roma man

However, what has been largely missing from the discussion is the responsibility of the pupil or the student for his or her own schooling. As some of the interviewed adults stated, no support network or school aid can do much if the pupil lacks interest in school. Making school more interesting is one approach, but encouragement and support from parents is essential. However, most of the interviewed pupils had a positive attitude towards school and clear visions for future education and possible employment.

“ I will emphasize it very strongly that it is the responsibility of the parents to oversee their children's upbringing as well as their schooling. If the child for example says I am not going to school this morning, it is the duty of the parent to make it clear that unless you are ill, you will go to school. If it is raining and the child says I cannot go because of the rain that is not an excuse to skip school.”

– Roma man

The Roma adults were also concerned about a wrong type of favouritism towards Roma pupils in schools. In fear of being discriminative, teachers sometimes allow Roma pupils to underachieve in school without taking the matter further and informing the parents. The Roma adults felt it is unfair that in a case of a mainstream pupil, the parents are promptly informed of any school-related problem. But the Roma pupils are being allowed to lag behind in their studies, without bringing the matter to the parents' knowledge. This prevents early intervention and, in some cases, sustains underachievement of the Roma pupils.

The Finnish regional Roma groups (ARONK) responsible for overseeing local Roma affairs concerning education and housing and for disseminating information on social and legal matters consist of both Roma people and other local authorities. The Roma adults, however, suggested that the local Roma groups need to create a platform for Roma children and youth to voice their concerns and express their needs. This has been lacking in the activities of the regional Roma groups, where it is the adults who have mainly taken decisions on behalf of the children.

The negative stereotypes against Roma are deeply rooted in Finnish society, which was mentioned as one of the greatest obstacles in the lives of the Roma. The Roma adults emphasized that a Roma is a member of his or her group, but also an individual in the group. Therefore, if the individual acts wrongly or against the laws of society, it does not mean that the whole group would do so. ●

Recommendations for the Future



Finnish society faces challenges in enhancing dialogue between mainstream culture and Roma culture, while the Roma community faces challenges in maintaining their values and traditions in today's world.

■ The task is to combine and reinforce multilayered identities. The children and youth wished that Finnish mainstream culture could see the value and uniqueness of Roma culture too, and value diversity within the framework of Finnish mainstream culture. Finnish society needs to transform the collective attitudes of diversity into a more positive note, as well as enhance the recognition and acceptance of its traditional minorities.

Without knowing and seeing that the interviewed children and youth were Roma, it would have been difficult to identify them as Roma just based on the interview tapes. Roma background came up only when it was specifically asked, apart from that the children described their lives as any other child would do, including family, school, friends and hobbies. However, to realize a full potential of the well-being and rights of Roma children, a comprehensive approach sensitive to Roma culture is needed. The contexts in which Roma children live and are educated vary in Finland, but there should be an all-inclusive approach starting from daycare and schools. It is important to sensitize mainstream pupils to Roma culture and to include Roma history and culture in the regular curriculum. Children develop attitudes from an early age and therefore adults need to allow positive friendships to develop. Forcing Roma into the dominant culture will not work, but what is needed is to understand similarity and difference not as opposites, but as enriching and complementing each other. As one interviewed Roma woman put it:

“ It is often said that increasing knowledge increases sorrow, but as regards Roma culture, knowledge instead lessens the sorrow.”

The Ombudsman for Children Recommends



1.

The Finnish public daycare and educational systems, as well as family and social services, would greatly benefit from personnel with Roma background. Special importance should be placed on Roma classroom assistants, primary and secondary school teachers and youth workers, who would teach and interact equally with mainstream and Roma pupils.

2.

All professionals working with Roma children should have access to updated information and knowledge on Roma culture, history and ways of living. Special sections on Roma culture should be added to teacher's education to increase their knowledge on the Finnish Roma. Furthermore, information on the Roma people as a part of Finnish society and history should be added to the official school curriculum and text books. The Government should promote awareness of the Roma minority among the general public and the Finnish media.

3.

The Roma children and young people increasingly need pastime activities which support their ethnic identity as Roma, such as Roma language clubs and children's clubs. However, Roma children should have equal opportunities to participate in the pastime activities and hobbies offered to the mainstream Finnish children.

4.

The Roma language is at the verge of extinction in Finland, therefore the language should be safeguarded. All Finnish Roma children should have a possibility to participate in Roma language lessons at least two hours a week at their choice. In public services, as well as in private Roma homes, the use of Roma language should be encouraged and promoted.

5.

Roma children and youth need to have more opportunities to participate in the local and governmental decision-making and to make their concerns heard to the state officials. The viewpoints of the Roma children and young people should be taken into account in preparing decisions concerning their rights and well-being in Finnish society. Greater involvement of Roma children is needed in the state structures, as well as within the Roma groups and community.

6.

Roma parents and families should be provided with parenting and family support services following their individual needs. Innovative and flexible support services and multi-professional networks should be developed in cooperation with Roma organizations, state services, municipalities, schools, youth services and local Roma groups.

Jyväskylä 1.2.2011

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which reads "Maria Kaisa Aula".

Maria Kaisa Aula, Ombudsman for Children in Finland



INFO BOX

The Ombudsman for Children in Finland promotes and safeguards the rights of children and young people. The basis duties are as follows:

1. Monitor the wellbeing of children and youth and the implementation of their rights.
2. Influence decision-makers from the viewpoint of children's rights.
3. Maintain contacts with children and youth and convey information received from them to the Finnish decision-makers.
4. Convey information concerning children to professionals working with children, decision-makers and the public.
5. Develop cooperation between actors concerned with child policy.
6. Promote the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Source: The Official Website of the Ombudsman for Children in Finland, www.lapsiasia.fi/en/overv/duties

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OMBUDSMAN FOR CHILDREN IN FINLAND
KENTENGO SAAKENGU TRAADIBOSKIIRO

This article focuses on the welfare and rights of the Finnish Roma children and youth. The original research report was published under the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in Finland in 2009.

The reported study was based on qualitative interviews with 36 Roma children and youth between 10–18 years. This article discusses the main findings of the report. It concludes with suggestions on improving and strengthening the welfare and rights of Roma children in Finland.

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