

Tuula Åkerlund, 3.-6.4.2024 Skopje, North Macedonia
The 12th Congress of the International Romani Union - IRU

4.4.2024 cl. 15-17. Fourth panel discussion: A fight against structural discrimination, antigypsyism and respect for human rights and the rights of Roma women

Latšo diives saare roma ta gaadže. Good afternoon everybody.

My name is Tuula Åkerlund and I worked as the executive director of Romano Missio Association for 18 years until February of this year. The Association is the oldest and largest national Roma organization in Finland, established 1906.

During this time my main goal has especially been to empowering Roma women. We have near 50 workers, half of them are Roma and most of them are Roma women.

The main operational works of Romano Missio in Finland are:

- 1) child protection,
- 2) spiritual work,
- 3) social and diaconal work,
- 4) training, publication and information activities,
- 5) child and youth work,
- 6) promotion of Romani culture and language and
- 7) supporting young Romani students.

The association's partners are:

- 1) Evangelical Lutheran Church,
- 2) Christian communities,
- 3) state,
- 4) municipalities (current: wellbeing services counties) and
- 5) the Roma population's own associations.

Every year, the Funding Center for Social Welfare and Health Organizations (STEA) has granted Romano Missio a significant grant for Roma social and diaconal work projects.

The organization has its own 14-bed children's home (Päiväkumpu). The goal of the organization's child protection work is to give Roma children and young people such a world of values and support for their growth that will enable them to survive as Roma in Finnish society.

The association's social and diaconal work is largely guidance and counseling over the phone, but more and more also problem solving together with the Roma population, other experts and authorities. Often it is also about supporting and encouraging customers in difficult life situations. At the client's request, the social worker can participate in various official negotiations. The social worker has several thousand negotiations during the year.

In social work and diaconia work, the aim is to find the right expert for various problem-solving situations, because the Finnish social security system is very complex. The association tries to build a functioning network of experts.

The social service counselor assists in housing matters by giving written and oral statements about the need for housing and especially about Romani culture. She also assists in the preparation of various complaints. We strive to support the constitutional rights of the Roma both for the authorities and for the Roma. Another priority area is livelihood issues: Roma are assisted as much as possible, authorities are contacted if necessary and statements are written.

Romano Missio serves students by giving e.g. bibliographies and other information about Romani culture. If necessary, Romano Missio employees can visit educational institutions to tell about Romani culture.

Romano Missio's social and diaconal work also includes exhibitions, home visits and negotiations with authorities and parishes. In Finland, a large part of social services has been transferred from society to the third sector, i.e. associations. A new model is now being developed for family work.

I am very happy have had this opportunity to be here during this few days and I have heard how marvelous work you Roma women are doing in your countries and all over the world. It's great that Roma women's issues are presented so wonderfully in this panel of ours, all the way to South America. You all really touched my heart.

Tarja Halonen, President of Finland in 2000-2012, has taught and encouraged Finnish Roma women a lot. Halonen has greatly influenced the improvement of the position of Roma women in Europe during a many years. She emphasized us, not to give up and to be proud of you.

Now I want to highlight: We Roma women have ability the gift to affect things, to make things better. We have got it as a birthday present. We know how to use wisdom and feeling.

In the Roma culture the man is the head of the family, but I claim that a woman still has a more valuable position: we women are the soul, the heart of the family not only in our own family, but throughout the community. We women transfer our values and attitudes to our children. Do you agree? I claim, if a woman can do well, the whole community can feel better. That is why it is important to strengthen women. I have done this in my own position as an executive director.

I want to encourage you also.

We have a lot of work, although Roma work is not easy, this is a hard field, but we are the persons, who can cultivate the field. We need to work on both sides of the field, affect the attitudes of our own Roma people, to make a positive change in time and to affect the attitudes of the majority.

We are the change. Let us spread the seed of hope around us, where we move and live. Let us support and encourage each other and together we are strong. We need each other and we really need you Gadže too, majority women. It is important that we do this work together.

In the end I want to thank you all and I wish you power and joy, health and blessing as you are doing Roma work in your own country.

Thank you God bless you all. Aaňňen Develessa!