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Analysis of the Areas of Social Discrimination in the Romani de Huelva Community

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Abstract

Although in recent years a whole series of measures and programmes have been carried out with the aim of having an impact on the situations of discrimination and racism in which the Romani population is immersed, the results obtained allow us to surmise that, although there has been some progress, the situation has not entirely changed. A stereotyped view of the Romani population still exists in some parts of Spanish society, meaning that this community continues to be immersed in a profound process of social exclusion. Objectives of research are to demonstrate whether there are situations of discrimination in the Huelva Roma population, as well as to know the areas in which these acts of discrimination are carried out. A qualitative method was chosen. The technique used was an in-depth interview, to allow us to understand the perspective of the professionals who work with this group. In general, we have seen how situations of discrimination against the Romani population persist. These situations extend to different spheres of life, and whose factors respond to a multiplicity of causes. There is a need for significant, long-lasting change. This means it is necessary both to change the processes of social intervention and to involve the Romani community itself, as without their collaboration and legitimacy any intervention will lack future perspective.

Keywords. Roma population; discrimination; areas of discrimination,

Introduction

Although in recent years many voices have testified that the situation of the Romani population is undergoing profound change, we must not let ourselves be carried away by euphoria. There are still many challenges to be tackled and overcome in order to put an end to the processes of exclusion and discrimination faced by this community. In fact, in its *Annual Report on Discrimination and the*

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Romani Community (2017, 2020), the *Fundación Secretariado Gitano* (Romani Secretariat Foundation) made it evident that in our country, the Romani population continues to face discriminatory situations that prevent them from enjoying full social citizenship. According to the Foundation, one of the main causes of this deep-rooted rejection is a lack of real knowledge about this minority, and therefore the Roma is almost always viewed through the lens of prejudice and stereotypes. In fact, both the traditional media and the internet tend to provide an unnecessary detail in the news – the fact that the person involved is Romani – which contributes to creating or emphasising the negative image with which this community is associated.

Although little by little the attitude towards ethnic and racial minorities has been changing in Spain, different sociological studies and official surveys (CIS-OBERAXE, 2011) continue to reveal data that allows us to say that Spanish society still holds onto prejudices. It is difficult to overcome these prejudices, as experience has shown us that neither policies of exclusion nor assimilation carried out in Spain have led to positive results with the Romani people (FSG, 2012, 2017). On the contrary, more than generating inclusion, they have created stigma, and with it have aggravated the levels of rejection and racism that they tend to generally suffer in their most immediate social context. This situation has led to the Romani community being included in the groups considered as vulnerable to the processes of social exclusion. As pointed out by Laparra and Pérez (2008), we cannot disregard the fact that the Roma community represents 12% of the social space of severe exclusion. Social exclusion in the Romani community, as authors point out (Damonti & Arza, 2014; Arza & Carrón, 2015; Damonti & Arza, 2014; Rizo & Blanco, 2002) pointed out, is not only a gap that persists. Instead, far from receding, it continues to worsen.

Just like with other groups, discussing social exclusion in the Romani population implies being outside the system that guarantees the full development and enjoyment of social rights. In fact, when analysing the matrix of factors that define processes of exclusion in the Roma community, it would be necessary to include those related to justice, police action and the media, as well as “classic” areas of discrimination (economy, training, labour, health, housing, relational factors, citizenship and participation), as they are suffering situations of discrimination and therefore social exclusion in both (La Parra, 2011).

As we know, the concepts of discrimination and social exclusion often go hand in hand, as being within or outside the social system (social inclusion/exclusion) involves either experiencing situations of social discrimination or not. Apart from poverty, it is known that exclusion is directly related to a lack of equal opportunities and treatment (FSG, 2012). The Romani community is well aware of this, as discrimination, both direct and indirect, greatly affects this group of people, hence the need for both legislative and political measures to help alleviate situations of

vulnerability and/or social exclusion. In fact, several decades have passed since certain initiatives were suggested to support the situation of legal vacuum in which the Roma population found itself, and which made it impossible for them to make any legal appeal against discriminatory acts (MSSSI, 2010).

Methodology

Objectives

Given the open-mindedness implicit in the chosen theme, it has been necessary to take a more specific position in order to make addressing our general objective more feasible, which is none other than carrying out a detailed analysis of whether the Romani population in general, and more specifically in Huelva, face situations of discrimination or unequal treatment. To make this task feasible, we have taken a series of categories into consideration which have helped us to determine the subject of our study, in particular: To see if situations of discrimination exist in the Romani population in Huelva, and in which areas this reality is evident.

Choosing the Methodology

Given that the objective of our study is to understanding a problem by using the professionals who face it on a daily basis as a point of reference, we considered it necessary to opt for a methodological perspective that would allow us to take the intersubjective dimension of this subject into account. For this reason, we have chosen a qualitative method. Although different data collection techniques are included within this perspective, we have used in-depth interviews. This was designed and employed in order to gather data related to the professionals who work at one of the two most important Romani associations in Huelva: the Fundación Secretariado Gitano (Romani Secretariat Foundation) and the *Unión Romani* (Romani Union), which both have a national and international scope.

Data Use and Analysis

It should be noted that all the material obtained has been analysed using an analytical model constructed in accordance with some very clear thematic axes or categories that have served as a guide for the analysis and presentation of the data. Based on these discussions, we produce the following lines which reflect the most important aspects of the subject of antiziganism in Huelva.

Results

Existence and Areas of Ethnic Discrimination in Huelva

What is the situation like in Huelva with regards to racism and discrimination? First of all, it is important to point out that stereotypes and prejudices regarding the Roma community are still deeply rooted in Huelva, and this has been made clear by the professionals interviewed, who all confirmed that this is the reality of Huelva.

“There is still a lot of prejudice, it’s something that still needs to be resolved (...) we are still very behind, and there is a lot ahead of us to work on” (FSG-1 Professional).

“Yes, there is antiziganism at the macro level. It does exist at the macro level. If we look at the level of intervention, in terms of health, there is a degree of discrimination” (UR Professional).

Although the Unión Romani in Huelva does not have a standardised complaint collection service, they do receive verbal complaints and try to resolve them where possible. In fact, they argue that although there are complaints, the Roma community does not tend to express them when it suffers from an episode classified as discrimination or antiziganism.

“The complaints we receive are those that reach us verbally, but there is no way for us to receive them. We haven’t got anything. In fact, the Romani community is not a community that has excessive complaints about the attitudes you classify as antiziganist” (UR Professional).

The same does not apply to the Fundación Secretariado Gitano in Huelva, which does have a formal complaint collection system. These complaints will be investigated and, if appropriate, action will be taken and they will be monitored. Although quantitatively speaking it is not a high number, it is important to say that in the last three years this entity has collected a total of 14 complaints involving some kind of discriminatory situation. In fact, the national report published by this organisation under the name *Annual Report on Discrimination and the Romani Community 2020* includes two cases that took place in Huelva in 2019.

“We belong to the Assistance Service for Victims of Discrimination which is made up of eight organisations (...) and what these entities do is work in a network, collecting these cases of discrimination in different areas and we collect the case, there is an investigation and, finally, action is taken and the cases are monitored. This is how we proceed from here” (FGG-2 Professional).

As far as the type of discrimination is concerned, it occurs both directly and indirectly, and in almost all areas of life. In fact, discrimination in the Roma community often goes hand in hand with or is closely related to the processes of

social exclusion. The purpose is not to establish a direct correlation that forces us to determine that discriminatory dynamics are the cause of the situations of social exclusion experienced by a large part of the Roma community. However, it is true that given the coincidences in the main areas where each one occurs, it is clear that both processes end up feeding one another. In other words, situations of exclusion can be influenced by the existence of discriminatory situations and vice versa. In which areas are discriminatory behaviours or attitudes seen in Huelva?

If we analyse the two cases published between 2017 and 2020 by the FSG in its *Annual Report on Discrimination and the Romani Community* and which refer to the data collected between 2016-2019, including the data for Huelva³, we see that they occurred in the field of education and housing. As an example of one of the cases of direct discrimination reported, we have the one related to the housing issue. More specifically, it mentions that a Romani family wanting to rent a house contacted the owner and after all the usual considerations, they agreed that the family would pay an amount corresponding to one month's rent as a deposit, to reserve the property for them. When they met in person to hand over the documents and keys, and the owner realised it was a Romani family, he told them that in the end he was not going to rent it out as he needed it himself, and returned the money they had paid. The family believes (and told the FSG) that the change came about when he met them and saw that they are Roma.

In fact, in the interview with the FSG, they repeat that discrimination still occurs in all areas, especially in education, employment, housing and access to resources and goods.

“It's in all areas. In the field of work, as well as when searching for housing, when looking for any resources” (FSG-1 Professional).

As FSG professionals from Huelva tell us, this discrimination goes beyond the very identity of the Roma person. It is also apparent with non-Romani people who have a professional link to the community, as is the case of some workers at the Fundación Secretariado Gitano.

“Even here, some of our colleagues have gone to buy something for their homes and had to finance it, and when they presented their payslip from working here... and she wasn't even Roma! Just because she worked here, at the Fundación Secretariado Gitano. So there is a lot of prejudice in all areas, and this is very difficult to resolve” (FSG-3 Professional).

The Unión Romaní makes the same observation when asked about this matter. They frame discrimination in all areas of life, but their discourse focuses mainly on educational, health and labour issues. They believe that much of the intervention

³ We will narrate the cases as they appear in the FSG's *Annual Report on Discrimination and the Romani Community* (2017, 2020)

in these fields is guided by discriminatory actions that end up having negative consequences for the Roma population, as would be the case in terms of healthcare. The main problem they highlight is that Roma people are being given priority or are receiving very early diagnoses of certain diseases with the sole purpose of preventing them being present in large numbers in hospitals, as it could bother others.

“They are being diagnosed excessively early for some diseases in order to prevent a massive influx of Roma into the hospital. Send gypsies home quickly, ‘because they’re filling the hospitals up...’ This is repeated again and again, and it’s something we’ve assessed” (UR Professional).

At the educational level, the problem stems mainly from the *hidden segregation* that takes place in some areas with a large Roma population. More specifically, this refers to the processes of ghettoisation that are taking place in some schools in the Torrejón district, such as the Colegio Andalucía and Colegio Onuba schools, where a very high percentage of the students are Roma, especially in Colegio Andalucía, where they represent 96% of the students. In this regard, it should be noted that the Onuba Infant and Primary Education Centre and the Marismas del Odiel Secondary School have been recognised by the Regional Ministry of Education for their Compensatory Education Plans, within the framework of the Andalusian Educational Evaluation Agency Study carried out during the 2016-2017 academic year on the detection of successful good practices. This has been possible thanks to the collaboration between the different sectors of the educational community and other organisations, including the Territorial Delegation for Equality, Health and Social Policies, the Unión Romani and the Fundación Secretariado Gitano⁴.

“At the educational level, the main problem is the hidden segregation that makes the children... that means we already have 96% of the Romani population in Andalusia. These are actions of discrimination” (UR Professional).

This ghettoisation is partly due to the fact that Romani students have a lot of problems in terms of their academic performance, and this means that in many classrooms the levels have to be lowered, a fact that other parents, including Romani parents, do not like. Therefore, they decide to take their children to other schools in search of a different educational model for their children.

“The schools in Torrejón, such as Onuba and Andalucía, which are public schools, have fewer and fewer children. It is true that there are more and more gypsy children, but overall there are fewer children. Those children are going to state-assisted private schools such as girls’ schools, the seminary or even Salesian schools. Parents complain about their children’s limited academic progress and say they have to find another educational model for them” (UR Professional).

⁴ Information published in the newspaper *Europapress: A school and an institute in Huelva are recognised for their good compensatory practices*. Published on 6 February 2018.

The Romani community also tends to suffer from discrimination in terms of employment. This discrimination that particularly notable when looking for a job using a CV or in a job interview. Living in certain areas (action areas), as well as having a Romani surname, Romani features, or not having professional training are the most common reasons that this group is rejected and excluded.

“We receive some complaints about geographical location when looking for work... where they live has an impact, as does their ethnicity, or having a Romani surname, although in some cases their location has a greater affect than their ethnicity. Both things come into play” (UR Professional).

“There are Roma working in all sectors: but mainly because the profiles are very basic, you know, because of all the difficulties they’ve had throughout history, well their training levels are very basic and this has an influence when it comes to finding a job” (FSG-1 Professional).

Nevertheless, the Unión Romaní wants to take a stand on this matter, as although in some cases being Roma is a determining factor when it comes to accessing a job, in others it is justified given the low or lacking level of training and professionalism that they have, especially those in a situation of social exclusion.

“In terms of access to employment, some cases are substantiated, and others aren’t. Because companies aren’t going to work with anyone without any kind of employment or training profile. Is the company rejecting them because they are Roma? The company is probably rejecting them because they don’t have any kind of qualifications and, when talking about excluded groups of Roma, this is something I really have to qualify, and that’s why we insist so much on the importance of education” (UR Professional).

The same happens in terms of housing. If we consider that a large part of Huelva’s Roma population is concentrated in areas considered as *Requiring Social Transformation*, it is to be expected that this will take its toll on them, as the stereotypical association with the Roma is immediately apparent: *Gypsy-Marginality-Crime*. As we have seen, this generalisation ends up affecting important areas of their lives such as education and work. This isolation involves the loss of a large part of social citizenship, as they do not participate in society under the same conditions as other citizens.

“They have isolated us in many towns. A road through the middle and, what’s more, a totally complicated road. What they have done for us is a problem and we are going to try to fight for... even the shape of the buildings, right? Everything going inwards. It’s a bunker” (FSG-2 Professional).

“Don’t let us be seen, the less we’re seen the better” (FSG-3 Professional).

We find the same situation in terms of the media. Although, according to Unión Romaní, Huelva is the city in Spain with the lowest rate of antiziganism in the

press, there is still much work to be done. In fact, as we have already mentioned, the media continues to be a major channel for the perpetuation of discriminatory and racist attitudes. Although there is a positive trend following the efforts of these two organisations (UR and FSG), the problem has not been completely eradicated. Whether it is through the news, television programmes or social networks, we continue to receive a pejorative image of the Romani ethnic group based on stereotypes and emphasis on their most negative aspects.

“It is a totally incorrect image. It is a totally incorrect image in the media, which further feeds into this stereotype that has nothing to do with us” (FSG-3 Professional).

“Look at the Unión Romani. Like every year, it continues its crusade with the media. We were here recently and we were able to show the curious case of Huelva. Huelva is the Spanish city with the lowest, with a low rate of antiziganism in the press. And it's true, that in one way or another, after nine years of publishing the press guide, you can see that there is a reduction” (UR Professional).

“Another crusade is eliminating the reality television programmes about the Romani community, which are doing a lot of harm, because what they are doing is perpetuating antiziganist behaviour” (UR Professional).

Discussion

Although we now have a solid framework in place that ensures all fundamental rights are respected, including those of ethnic minorities such as the Roma, this is not the case at a practical level (Gamella, 2011). There is still much resistance to implementing some of these rights, given the crisis of human and social values that is taking place in certain European countries, the most current example of which is the unfortunate statements made by the Italian Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini in 2018, announcing his intention to take a census of the Sinti ethnic group living in Italy and to expel all those who are irregular, saying *“As for the Italian Roma, unfortunately, one has to keep them at home”* (Melguizo, 2018).

The Romani community has always been one of the groups most rejected by the population at an international and national level. Reports published on this matter in recent years attest to this, as is the case with the Eurobarometers⁵, where 77% answered yes when asked if being Roma was a social disadvantage, and only 12% said they had any kind of relationship with Roma people. 40% believed that discrimination is widespread throughout Europe, with ethnicity being the main factor of discrimination. In fact, the data also suggested that for 61% of the EU population and 66% of the Spanish population surveyed, discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or race is the most widespread.

⁵ Special Eurobarometers on discrimination: no. 263 3n 2007, no. 2962n 2008, no. 317 in 2009. Data provided by the Fundación Secretariado Gitano (2012: 54).

Although in recent years a whole series of measures and social intervention programmes have been carried out in Huelva, with the aim of having an impact on the situations of discrimination and racism in which the Romani population is immersed, the results obtained allow us to determine that, although there has been some progress, the situation has not entirely changed, as a stereotyped view of the Romani population still exists in some parts of society in Huelva. This continues to limit the processes of inclusion, and with it the consolidation of signs of rejection and racist attitudes and behaviour.

In part this may be due, as Arenas (2012) points out, to the fact that the processes of intervention with the Roma ethnic minority have been subject to biased values, leading to forms of action that are far removed from the key political strategies and therefore highly dependent on the political and bureaucratic interests of the moment, which continue to mitigate the existing suspicions and stereotypes regarding this group.

However, this situation can change, as long as there is an end to the ethnocentric vision that relegates this minority to a space of self-marginality outside the circuits of social inclusion (Arenas, 2012), and the Roma population becomes aware of the need to make significant changes to this situation of exclusion. This transformation must include all the areas we have analysed, and in which different situations of discrimination become common on a daily basis (education, training, employability, etc.) (MSSSI, 2014, 2012).

In fact, from the perspective of social work, we must point out that, although the changes that have taken place in the field of education are not yet sufficiently significant in quantitative terms, they are significant in qualitative terms. More and more Roma families are convinced of the importance of education, as not only their future but also the success or failure of the social inclusion processes depend on it. This is why the social workers belonging to both of Huelva's Romani associations are working to improve this situation, trying to ensure that Romani children are at least able to finish secondary school, thus lowering the percentages of students who leave school early, and trying to ensure that they can reach the highest possible educational level.

The changes that are becoming possible in terms of employment are also related to this. Although the Romani community continues to be established in certain employment niches and tends to work on its own, the possibility of exploring other areas of work is increasingly considered, and is doing so through a model of labour relations based on working for others (as employees). Once again, this is being made possible thanks to the enormous efforts of Romani associations, both nationally and in Huelva.

There have also been some changes in the Huelva Romani community in terms of health. These are mainly related to increasing age of maternity, as fewer and fewer girls are having children. In fact, Romani women are becoming more aware of the importance of health for their own well-being and are therefore having more

regular medical check-ups. This is especially notable with regards to mental health, given the major psychological problems they often have, particularly related to anxiety. Also, the major diseases and epidemics that have affected socially excluded neighbourhoods are subsiding, as cases of HIV and drug addiction among the Romani population have declined. However, as La Parra (2009) and Gil (2016) have pointed out, improving the health of this group would involve establishing strategic alliances between the different national and/or regional health systems, which are capable of improving the information and care systems provided to this population.

Conclusion

All of this leads us to determine that any process of social intervention that can be carried out with the Romani population must be considered from a comprehensive perspective (both at the level of areas and levels of intervention), capable of bringing together the resources and efforts that the different public and private administrations and NGOs are carrying out with the Romani community.

Finally, it bears repeating that the change is being led by Romani women, as they are most aware of the reality they inhabit. So much so, that the Romani associations are banking on it. They are working with Romani women so that they are able to break down the cultural barriers that relegate them to the background, both within their own cultural system and in society in general.

However, in order for these changes to be sustainable, the approval and involvement of the Romani community itself are needed. Without their collaboration and legitimacy, any intervention will lack future prospects.

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