

Selvhjelp for innvandrere og flyktninger (SEIF) is a Norwegian national NGO established in 1986. Our work consists in giving information, guidance and practical assistance to immigrants and refugees who contact our offices around the country. In 2012 we received over 12.000 contacts from more than 120 nationalities.

See our web site, ww.seif.no, for more information on SEIF's activities.

The mains points described are as follows:

- **HUMAN RIGHTS OF ROMA CHILDREN IN NORWAY**
- **ID PAPERS TO PERSONS WITH LEGAL RESIDENCE IN NORWAY**

HUMAN RIGHTS OF ROMA CHILDREN IN NORWAY

We hereby want highlight the precarious situation that Roma children in Norwegian society are confronted with. This situation raises fundamental questions related to these children's human rights that urgently need to be addressed. The Norwegian state does not seem to comprehend the magnitude nor the implications of what these issues mean not only for the children concerned, but also for the survival of an entire national minority.

Here we will give a short historic overview and how our organization SEIF has contributed in this field since we started our project ten years ago.

When we started working with the Roma community in Oslo in 2003 we witnessed a community that had been completely ignored for many years. The last municipal projects from the 1970s and 80s had not given any specific results and had been abruptly ended. That had left the Roma community in complete marginality and with no specific programs to turn to for assistance and guidance. We witnessed a community characterized by illiteracy, poverty, crime and abuse. We soon alerted the authorities about this situation and urged them to implement urgent measures in order to improve the living conditions of the Roma community in Oslo. We strongly recommended the implementation of a plan of action and hence the importance of coordinated measures. But to our surprise the authorities did not see the need for such an action plan. Finally in 2009, and after two rival families literally had crashed against each other, that the Norwegian government realized the importance and need for specific measures for this community. SEIF had in the meantime reported to the Council of Europe about the situation of the Roma community, in particular the extremely low school attendance among Roma children and how Norwegian authorities lacked specific measures to deal with this problem.

The action plan to improve the living conditions for the Roma community in Oslo, launched in 2009, failed in our opinion to address fundamental issues such as illiteracy, school attendance, arranged marriages between minors and the status of Roma women within family and community structures. The plan is completely devoid of a gender perspective as there are no specific measures directed towards Roma women and/or girls. Neither are there any measures concerning the children's school education. A literacy program for young adults and an information center are the only two measures that have been implemented since the plan was launched. It must be stated that these two measures have given poor results. An evidence of how these measures have failed to address the specific needs of the Roma community is the steady number of Roma women and children that continue to contact SEIF for assistance as they experience their problems and needs are not met by the official programs. We should mention that in 2012 our statistics showed a considerable increase in the number of Roma that contacted our organization.

As a result of our continuous contact with the Roma community we have been faced with new problems and challenges that put in jeopardy the future of this national minority. An increased number of Roma families have lost custody of their children. According to the last statistics we have had access to this problem concerns 37 Roma children that at the moment are living in Norwegian foster homes. This is an extremely high number of children, particularly having in mind that we are here dealing with approximately 150 children. The gravity of some of these cases has led the Norwegian Child Protection Offices to implement extreme measures, such as giving the Roma parents limited visitation rights with their children (one or two yearly visits of 2 hours per visit), and in some cases no visitation rights at all. In cases where visitation rights have been granted the children and their parents are not allowed to speak Romanés with each other – a breach of their fundamental human rights. Furthermore Roma children living with Norwegian foster families are deprived of their right to receive education on Roma culture and language.

Roma women and mothers tell us they fear for the future of their children and how the children living in Norwegian foster homes are lost forever. Without the capacity to speak their own mother tongue they will never be able to integrate themselves in the Roma community and will always be considered as outsiders. Many young Roma women also fear getting pregnant or giving birth in Norway as they fear Child Protection Services will take the children from them.

This is an unfortunate development that we are being witness to and that is not being dealt with by the Norwegian authorities. In our reports to the authorities we have drawn specific attention to the consequences of this tragic development and to the need for a coordinated effort in order to preserve the Roma community. Our recommendations have not been heard and the problems for the Roma have just continued to escalate. An extremely violent incident between two rival Roma families that took place just a couple of months ago, serves as an example to show the critical situation of the Roma community in the Norwegian society.

In addition to the problems mentioned above, Roma children are still faced with issues that Norwegian authorities have not yet been able to solve, i.e. illiteracy, low school attendance (particularly among Roma girls) and early marriage. All in all these children's fundamental human rights are not being respected.

We fear for the survival of the Roma community in Norway and see the lack of interest and initiative by the Norwegian authorities. The most direct consequence of this lack of political will and action is the gradual disappearance of a national minority whose youngest generation is being lost either to illiteracy or to forced assimilation under the auspices of the Norwegian Child Protection Services.

Recommendations

- As members of a national minority, Roma children living with Norwegian foster families should be ensured their right to receive education in Roma culture and language.
- Roma children living at Norwegian foster homes should be ensured their right to speak their mother tongue with their biological family.
- Specific measures in order to facilitate and secure Roma children's school attendance should be implemented, such as practical guidance and assistance from social workers to Roma families and school assistants with Roma background present at schools.
- All Roma pupils should be ensured their right to get education in their mother tongue, Romanés.

ID PAPERS TO PERSONS WITH LEGAL RESIDENCE IN NORWAY

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention the state has the obligation to issue ID papers and travel documents to any refugee with legal residence permit in the country¹. In spite of this, a growing number of refugees are being denied their right to acquire travel documents due to insufficient verification of identity, something the refugee himself in most cases is unable to provide. An example can illustrate this problem: an asylum seeker was granted refugee status by the Norwegian Supreme Court. The man had no ID papers and had previously operated with a false identity. Norwegian immigration authorities denied the man's application for a travel document. Hence this man is residing legally in Norway, but remains undocumented. Many youngsters victims of forced marriage operate with their national passports. The problem arises when they need to renew the passport. With a new name, secret address and a whole family looking for them, the young victim does not dare contact her embassy for a renewal of the passport. Many embassies also do require authorization from the parents, something these youngsters cannot comply. These young persons are hence forced to live for several years as undocumented persons, with all the restrictions this implies².

Recommendations

- The 1951 Refugee Convention should be met in all cases where refugee status is granted. Granting refugee status should also imply the right to receive identification papers making the refugee able to operate as any other legal resident in Norway.
- Young victims of forced marriage should be granted alien's passport in order to be able to live their lives as any other youngster residing legally in Norway.

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¹ The 1951 Refugee Convention articles 27 and 28.

² Additional information on victims of forced marriage and other forms of honour related violence can be found in SEIF's reports from the projects "*Mellom barken og veden*" and "*Veien videre*" at www.seif.no.