

# Discrimination against Roma in the Swedish Social System

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**I**N 1999, Roma were recognised as one of five historical minorities in Sweden and Romani Chib was recognised as a minority language. As a consequence, a Council for Romani Issues was formed in 2002 as an advisory council for the government. The recognition of Roma as a national Swedish minority means that Roma have increased opportunities to influence how questions concerning Romani life are handled at the national level directly. Nevertheless, the overall picture of the living conditions of Roma is still alarming. Roma in Sweden live in a very exposed situation in all relevant economic, cultural, and social aspects – not least in terms of access to schooling, the labour market and housing. In 2003, the Swedish Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination published a report entitled “Discrimination against Romanies in Sweden” and will in early 2008 present a report updating the situation of Roma.

Since its formation, the Council for Romani Issues has had many discussions with affected Roma on the topic Romani children in a non-Romani foster home or institutional environment. The Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination (hereafter referred to as “DO”) has also received complaints of discrimination by authorities while children are being taken into social care, as well as the risk of Romani children losing contact with their background and identity when placed in a foster care setting lacking awareness of Romani language and culture.

It is important to take in consideration that everybody, regardless of their ethnicity, is in

a situation of dependency during contact with an authority like the child protection service. At no time does this fact become more evident than when that authority is being exercised. For Roma in contact with authorities, there is also the majority/minority relationship with an uneven division of power in favour of the social worker, the police officer, etc. These relations and contacts are also characterised by the historical experiences of Roma as well as by their present, difficult social and cultural situations. Authorities such as social workers are also influenced by their respective histories and traditions. Their representatives are affected by existing conditions and patterns of thought.

In the experience of the DO, not many Roma complain when they have been subjected to discrimination. The reason for this might be a lack of awareness of existing protections or a lack of trust in the authorities. In addition to that, many Roma experience discrimination as an everyday thing and offensive treatment can pass unreported. The annual numbers of complaints of discrimination received by the DO from Roma are some 30 – 40, and some 7 of these complaints have been taken to court. Five of these complaints have concerned social services and given the right circumstances these cases can also be taken to court.

The number of complaints is significantly lower than the believed level of discrimination. It probably reflects the level of trust Roma place in authorities like the DO whose task is to handle cases of discrimination. One might presume that people can

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feel a hesitation against filing a complaint against one authority with another authority. Most of the complaints filed with the DO concern instances in which Roma have experienced not being treated as individuals. Many Roma say that they instead are characterised by the perception of Roma as a group. One of the most sensitive responsibilities of the social service concerns the placement of children into foster care. Bearing in mind the memories of past abuse supported by the past population policy, the laws on sterilisation and different ways of removing children from their families for care within the social system in Sweden, one realises that social service representatives tread a minefield when handling Romani children in difficult situations. The DO has had many discussions with troubled Roma on the topic of foster homes and the institution placement of Romani children in a non-Romani environment.

In 2006, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare carried out an investigation into this exact issue. Special attention was paid to 71 cases in which Romani children are removed from their families. The result of this study indicates that Romani children who are removed from their families are not over-represented in the Swedish social system. The research also indicates that the social service did nothing wrong in these cases.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, it is not possible to illuminate discrimination against Roma within the social

service on the basis of this study. The study does not even allow the DO to reach a conclusion about the mechanism of discrimination, or about how expressions of anti-Gypsyism influence the situation when social services place Romani children in foster care. The study was based on the notion that Romani participation is of fundamental importance, but Roma did not take part in the formulation of problems or the conclusions of the study.

Roma demand changes, especially regarding discrimination. In order to develop methods and strategies, the DO will shed light on how sets of rules, norms and patterns of thoughts within the social service might discriminate against Roma. In order to make discrimination against Roma visible, insight and awareness will not be enough. There will also be a need to conduct a study, which highlights how and if legislation can ensure the rights of Roma individual protection against ethnic discrimination in situations of child protection. The DO's awareness of and insight into the living conditions of Roma are fundamental to its possibilities to investigate very complex cases. To make discrimination evident in the case of removing a child from its family, it is necessary to bring to light in what manner such actions are taken. Forced intervention by the state in the past (based on legislation on population planning with sterilisations) and the placement of children for in social care are historical facts which cannot be disregarded when actual cases of discrimination will be investigated by the DO.

<sup>3</sup> *Omhändertaganden av romska barn, Socialstyrelsen 2006.*