

A fresh view of job creation

The Spanish are way ahead in Europe in dealing with employment for Roma. This EU-backed project looks at Roma job-seekers without reducing them to stereotypes

Sociologist Belén Sánchez-Rubio helped set up the European Social Fund's Acceder job-seeking programme 12 years ago at the Fundación Secretariado Gitanos, Spain's biggest non-governmental organisation dealing with Roma. It has been a great success, with more than 47,000 employment contracts in run-of-the-mill companies going to Roma. "Spain is now seen as a model," Sánchez-Rubio says. "We were happy to see that the EU framework for national strategies on Roma has taken our approach on board."



The butcher's trade is not a traditional Roma occupation, so what?

"Ours is a dramatic change of approach in how to deal with Roma employment. Across the EU, non-governmental organisations and public administrations have traditionally seen the Roma as a minority group with their own ways, their own economic activities, a wish to be among themselves. The classic approach to employment programmes was to promote their traditional activities. A lot of money has been spent on programmes that had very little impact.

"Acceder suddenly considered in a completely different light how to improve the economic condition of Roma. We started to look at Roma as a social group excluded from the labour market. If we want social inclusion, we argued, let's do that for the Roma too and get them jobs in ordinary companies, like everyone else. Let's stop thinking of specific Roma occupations. At first, some public authorities and Roma representatives had serious doubts about our early hypothesis but they've since changed their minds and fully support it.

"We started in 1999 with a pilot experiment in Madrid and in 2000 we spread it to the whole of Spain. Roma come to us on a voluntary basis only. There is no link to social benefits, we just offer the programme and opportunities. We give personal guidance to job seekers, individual counselling and training for those who need it. In the first two years, very few women came along, so we went into the community and looked for powerful women, women who were references within the group. We explained what the project was about. This worked and snowballed and more and more women turned up. The same happened in a less spectacular way with men.

"We also have direct contact with companies. In a pre-recruitment process in some areas, some of our counsellors went door-to-door to establish partnerships. We wanted to speak the language of companies, to find out what they needed and assure them that they could trust us to send the appropriate people. We weren't invoking solidarity or social responsibility. Now we work with more than 1,000 companies.

"Young Roma lack basic skills, and many have not finished their compulsory education. We're working on that too, particularly as nowadays you almost need a university degree to get a cleaning job! Everyone was surprised by our figures. Companies are actually hiring Roma, although there's still a fair amount of discrimination. When we come across companies with discriminatory attitudes, we start by mediating, which usually works, although we have been known to go to court. We hope our work will not be overly affected by the economic crisis. We're afraid of cuts to public funding and a change to the welfare state model and the public policy of social inclusion."

Acceder

Acceder is a job-seeking programme co-funded by the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, and managed by the Foundation Secretariado Gitanos in Spain. Thirteen Spanish regions and more than 40 city councils took part.

Stopping violence against women

A project in the Barcelona area found that Roma women were keen to talk among themselves about gender issues

Núria Francolí Sanglas is a sociologist who works for SURT, a private foundation for women's rights in Barcelona. From 2011 to 2013, the foundation's research team worked an EU-funded project to combat violence against children, young people and women.

"It was Romani women who first asked us at SURT if we had thought about doing something about violence against Romani women. We've been working with the Roma for many years, but we hadn't done anything on gender-based violence.



It isn't always easy for Roma women to discuss violence and issues of equality

"Gender-based violence is widespread across society, of course, but some aspects are specific to the Roma community. The Roma have strong and pervasive patriarchal values. Our research showed that violence against women was sometimes excused, even by women. Either the phenomenon was denied, or it was justified by saying that the woman was responsible for it, or that she somehow deserved it.

"We worked with Roma women in Barcelona and surrounding villages where people live in houses, work in the labour market, and are not in extreme situations of social exclusion as in camps. For the same project in Italy, Romania and Bulgaria, some of the women interviewed lived in camps.

"During the field work phase, we did interviews and held focus groups, where Roma women talked about their daily experience of violence and issues of equality, and gender identity versus Roma identity. It can be quite difficult for Roma women who

want freedom and autonomy to subordinate to the community interest.

"In the project's second phase, we designed a tool kit for professionals to detect violence and prevent it, and then we organised training sessions for professionals. At the same time, we held workshops with Roma men and women where we discussed issues of gender equality and gender-based violence. The problem obviously can't be solved over two workshops because attitudes are deeply rooted in identity and way of life, but it's the beginning of a long journey of awareness-raising. Roma women liked the project and asked for other similar opportunities to share their experiences. They said they felt talking with each other was a form of empowerment.

"The project also aimed to raise awareness among policy-makers at national and European levels. At the EU level, we organised a closing seminar on Romani women and gender-based violence within Romani communities at the European Parliament in Brussels. The seminar was an opportunity to raise awareness among decision-makers and other stakeholders of the situation of Romani women within the EU, which was also one of the project's objectives."

Empow-Air

Empow-Air is a project funded by the European Commission's Daphne III Programme to combat violence against children, young people and women. SURT coordinated the project partners in Italy, Bulgaria, Romania and Spain.