

# GADJE TO GADJE:<sup>1</sup> WE SHOULD LISTEN MORE TO OSLO'S DESTITUTE ROMA EU CITIZENS

Roma people make up a large proportion of the people supported at the Department for Destitute Migrants of the Church City Mission in Oslo. The Department is doing important work to aid the social inclusion of Roma people. They focus particularly on Roma women, providing them with both practical skills and knowledge around hate crimes and discrimination in order to help them recognise if they have been victims of such acts. There is also a big emphasis on activism, challenging the stereotypes that perpetuate Roma's extremely marginalised status and listening to Roma people's first-hand accounts of discrimination.



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## THE CHURCH CITY MISSION'S DEPARTMENT FOR DESTITUTE MIGRANTS: A BACKGROUND

The Department for Destitute Migrants at the Church City Mission<sup>2</sup> in Oslo was founded in November 2018 to provide essential social services to economically marginalised migrants. In addition to covering basic human needs, the centre specialises in social work and more elaborate case work. The department's staff consists of 20 employees with a range of academic and professional backgrounds and language profiles in order to best meet the needs of the diverse target group. Among the department's projects are an emergency shelter for women and couples, a cafe that offers cheap food and counselling, weekly outreach, a laundry service, storage boxes and a soup kitchen that serves free food during the weekends. We also run a three-year project called V4, which consists of three flats where destitute migrants can stay for short periods of time while a nurse, a social worker and a lawyer work on their cases. This diverse range of services offers the organisation a broad access to the target group which includes people from many European countries that are in Norway either for a limited period of time or are looking to establish a new life in Oslo. Though data on ethnicity is not collected, the majority of our service users are Romanian citizens who identify as Roma. Many earn their incomes from street related activities like begging, collecting plastic bottles, busking or selling magazines. Many have little to no formal education, lack a foreign language and possess little understanding of the Norwegian system and its laws and regulations. This leaves them vulnerable to being exploited in the informal labour market, receiving little to no pay, working overtime without compensation, and generally facing working conditions which do not correspond to Norwegian labour regulations, such as a lack of access to sanitary facilities and/or having to live on the working

site. At the same time, many experience homelessness as mobile EU citizens living in Norway.

Since the services that fulfil basic needs are provided by the private NGO sector and not the municipality, one can observe that homelessness becomes a lifestyle defined by the different opening hours of the services people access. The homeless need to plan ahead when and where they can have a shower, wash clothes, eat for free and ask for help or counselling. This scheduling becomes an obstacle to generating income.

## FOCUS ON THE NEEDS OF ROMA WOMEN LIVING IN HOMELESSNESS

There has been an increase of destitute Romanian Roma women in circular migration to Oslo, which has challenged the way homelessness is understood by the Norwegian system. Homelessness caused by discrimination and generational poverty, as opposed to drug addictions and mental health issues have challenged the existing efforts in place to combat homelessness. The church city mission is thus active in fighting poverty and discrimination as the cause to homelessness, by focusing on empowerment, social entrepreneurship and political movement.

The Church City Mission in Oslo has run several sewing courses geared toward Roma women in the period 2013-2018. This culminated in the SyRom project which between 2016 and 2018 had a total of 47 participants that finished the courses. The aim of the project was to give Roma women a real and sustainable alternative to begging. A Romanian speaking social worker has also organised political workshops.

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The Department for Destitute Migrants in Oslo is now planning to focus more on working against hate crime and discrimination, particularly in the case of women. The sense is that many of the department's guests might be victims without being aware of it or without being aware of their right to object. This is a consequence of a lack of knowledge of the concepts as well as a pervasive notion of gender ideologies which does not leave room to complain. A first component in the department's work, then, is to organise focus groups in order to identify what level of knowledge our guests have of concepts like hate crime, hate speech and discrimination, and fill in the gaps. A secondary feature of this new focus is the instruction given to the police by the Ministry of Justice in 2013 which states that European citizens can be expelled from Norway for committing minor offences, justifying it as a threat to the well-being of Norwegian society. The City Mission's position is that these instructions are being unfairly enforced by the police and appear to be targeting European destitute migrants and especially Roma individuals who are allegedly guilty of misdemeanours. The organisation is currently drafting a complaint to The Anti-Discrimination Tribunal and is also considering a complaint to the EFTA Court. Furthermore, the Department is lobbying with a political party that has sent an open letter to the Ministry of Justice asking that the instruction is withdrawn.

Recently, the Department of Destitute Migrants has reinitiated the so-called "Roma network in Oslo", which consists of several NGOs, public institutions, and the University of Oslo. The focus of the network is to provide a platform for stakeholders that work with the group to share information and cooperate on issues that are considered as discriminatory and/or unjust. The previously mentioned instruction given to the police is one of the subjects that receives a lot of attention in the network. Discrimination and anti-Roma racism/antiziganism are also central here, and thanks to this discourse, the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud intends to launch a page where victims and witnesses can register hate crimes in Oslo. Due to the aforementioned complication that many migrants do not perceive themselves as victims, the platform will also serve to inform social workers of how widespread the phenomenon is in Norway right now and how to better address it in a structured way.

## SOCIAL WORK IN A GADJE WORLD

The social work team at the Church City Mission consists of people with various backgrounds and experiences, from countries like Romania, Sweden, Hungary, Poland and Norway. Some are men, most are women, nearly all are white, and none are Roma. Over many years the team has grown, and the Church City Mission has become an important driving force for destitute mobile Roma rights, empowerment and an opposing force to stereotypes and discrimination. There is no lack of commitment or good intentions, and the team is proud to have several social projects running progressively for many years. However, we will, inevitably, make mistakes. The world cannot however be built on good intentions alone.

A core part of social work is advocacy and building platforms for oppressed groups to be able to raise their voice. At the Church City Mission, we have had political workshops, focus groups on discrimination, Roma women activists, demonstrations, policy writing and media involvement. Roma people have been speaking out about the barriers they face for a long time, and at a certain point we must ask ourselves, have we really been listening?

Some of the most important movements of our time, or perhaps historically, are #metoo and #BlackLivesMatters. It can be very challenging to explain these movements and the complexity contained in those short hashtags to someone who has never felt in their hearts, on their skin or in their stomach what it means. Anti-Roma racism/Antiziganism is an intersectional phenomenon and a complex form of discrimination which deserves the same visibility as the aforementioned movements. It is important to remember that we are constantly (re)shaping the world with our language, not only for ourselves, but also for people around us. An example of the language that non-Roma "Gadje" have created (and sadly still prevails) is a

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stereotypical descriptive of Roma as 'lazy' and 'dishonest'. These stereotypes represent a considerable obstacle affecting the work at the Department for Destitute Migrants, and it needs to be addressed, loud and clear.

Our destitute mobile Roma have experienced being kicked and spat on, making it dangerous to beg with a visible Roma ethnicity. Many have requested that the social workers print pictures of their children, to help convince the passers-by of the sincerity of their claims to poverty and need for assistance. Many guests repeated that they would not have left their families and children if it was not out of absolute

necessity. They are not looking for pity, they are stating the obvious: we are all people with basic human needs. It is utterly unbelievable that others can deny this shared humanity, even when generationally accustomed to such extreme discrimination. As with #metoo and #BlackLivesMatters, those who hold the power have the ability to change things, and they must be the ones to initiate the change.

## RESPECT, JUSTICE AND CARE

The Church City Mission's vision of respect, justice and care for all is at the core of the organisation's values. Like the global ethical principle of social work, it demands that we actively involve ourselves, educate ourselves, do not accept oppressive practices and speak up. Respect means to look more deeply and broaden our perspective. Are our laws and social policies fair? Oslo created laws against sleeping in public places and EU citizens are being expelled and banned from re-entering the country for petty crimes. Both these laws target destitute mobile Roma EU citizens and both are based on racist stereotypes of unsettled and dishonest people. Justice means that no

one should experience discriminatory, racist and oppressive practices. Poverty cannot be fought with high fines and expulsion and neither can racism. We are greatly concerned for destitute mobile Roma citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic and feel helpless as we get reports from Roma families with no access to food and water in some of the hardest hit zones of Eastern Europe. In addition to this extreme poverty, uncertainty, illness, hunger and desperation they face, we read that the Roma are scapegoated as the carriers of the pandemic and attacked on the streets. We are horrified, but sadly not surprised.

Care means taking responsibility for tearing down anti-Roma racism/antiziganist structures, starting at the roots: Gadje to gadje.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 The term *gadje* means "Non-Roma" in Romani. For more detailed explanations on the term read the [CoE Glossary of terms relating to Roma issues](#).
- 2 The Church City Mission (Kirkens Bymisjon) was founded in 1855 and is an open and inclusive humanitarian non-governmental organization active throughout Norway, working with people who face difficulties in their everyday life. Its vision is that all people should experience respect, justice and care.

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