



## **Women break the stigma: a success story from Albania!**

Roma culture contributed substantially to the Albanian national heritage. For the first time in Albanian history, this statement was officially supported by the Albanian President. With a speech, he recently opened a permanent exhibition on Roma culture in the Albanian National Museum.

Groups of Roma women from different towns and villages initiated the display of their culture in the museum. How did they manage this? It all began with a rather conventional activity: women sewing clothes to show the traditional outfits of their culture. The women then realised that the influence of their culture to Albanian society was not recognised by any formal institution or authority, whereas Roma have been living in Albania for centuries and as such contributed to the development of contemporary Albanian society.

### **The Road to Change**

One of the Roma women who advocated for the exhibition, was Vito Gashi. He is what she says: 'When I was young, about 14-15 years old, I wanted to wear my grandmother's traditional dress. She told me how Roma women used to dress before and I liked listening to her. Yet, whenever I went out in the dress, other people offended me saying "look at that arixheshka (Roma young woman), she wears her rags". Although I wanted to dress in traditional clothes sometimes, I couldn't as I was ashamed and afraid of other people.'

To overcome her shame, Vito Gashi negotiated with the National Museum to show the value of her culture. What would others expect from them? Would they accept the exhibition of Roma culture in the museum? In spite of these doubts, women were determined to reach their goal. The process of negotiation with the museum representatives underwent several stages during which the women were supported by Roma Active Albania.

### **Advocating in the Museum**

With the support of RAA, Roma women visited the National Museum and organised meetings and a workshop with museum representatives. They explained the importance of promoting their values by presenting Roma culture and the clothes they made. In the end, the Museum provided the Roma minority with its own area in the museum to show the different aspects Roma culture to the public.

Sewing clothes to demonstrate Roma culture functioned as a magnet: women spontaneously joined when they heard about it. They met and discussed often and they began to wonder why their culture is not considered to be part of Albanian culture, even though Roma have been living in Albania for centuries. They feared the disappearance of their tradition, without recognition of its contribution. This concern mobilised even more women. Roma Active Albania supported the women in spreading the information.

Although Roma have been living in Albania for over 600 years, they are perceived as nomads and second-hand people, deprived of valuable history and culture. This stigma and the classification of Roma as 'different' causes prejudices and discrimination. The image has been transmitted from one generation to another, enlarging isolation and instilling the fear to be associated with Roma culture. The exhibition in the museum is an important step in changing the mentality of people, so they will see Roma as worthy citizens. Another

perspective is highlighted: that of Roma as people of dignity who are proud of what they represent.

### **Debates about culture**

Respect for cultural diversity, meaning the understanding that people differ from each other, is important in changing the marginalized position of Roma. The opening of the exhibition is a start, but further debates between people are necessary. Nobody is born with a complete set of attitudes and values. People learn how they should behave from the culture in which they grow up and live. Often, other cultures or subgroups are judged without proper knowledge about them.

The debates are organised in towns and villages. They highlight values within Roma culture and create mutual understanding between Roma and non-Roma, so people can form a conscious opinion. The cultural debates promote the respect of democratic values, balancing cultural unity and diversity and protecting the rights of different groups.

RAA aims to empower Roma people and counter the negative stigma associated with them. The support to the women shows RAA's view on empowering grassroots Roma. The women proved that they were capable persons that are proud of their culture. This changes the view of non Roma that visit the museum or see them in the media. By concentrating on something that is important for the entire Roma minority, Roma men look at them differently too: the women proved to be able to make a positive and significant change for the entire Roma minority.

*Written by Petra Nederkoorn*