

GLOBAL VOICES

Erzsébet fights for Roma children's rights

Social worker Erzsébet Mohacsi from Budapest fights discrimination against Hungarian Roma children and against segregation in Hungarian schools

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In Hungary, there is a law guaranteeing all of the country's citizens equal rights. But this is not always the case in practice. 35 year old social worker Erzsébet Mohacsi from the capital city of Budapest believes that Hungarian Romas encounter discrimination from a very young age. She finds this fact disturbing.

"Many Hungarian schools segregate their students. It is prohibited by Hungarian law, but there is no monitoring of this area, which means that the schools more or less are free to do what they want. We attempt to track down the schools where this is happening and report it to the authorities," says Erzsébet Mohacsi.

She believes that segregation at the schools contributes to keeping the Roma population at

the bottom of Hungarian society and that segregation is a direct cause of the low level of schooling among Romas, making them losers in society.

Erzsébet Mohacsi is the head of the Chance for Children Foundation, with offices in a multi-storey building in the Budapest centre. The office is simply furnished. You will not find any designer furniture, leather sofas or framed posters here. They do not have the money, nor the need for these things.

The most important thing is that there is a space to register all of the cases of racial discrimination that the foundation constantly encounters throughout the country. The number of ring binders, folders and stacks of paper, as well as the large pile of copied materials in the adjacent copy room is clear evidence that there is plenty to deal with.

Had to do something

Erzsébet has always enjoyed working with children. Therefore, she had not a moment's doubt when it was time to choose a profession after completing secondary school. She chose to study to become a pedagogue. For some years after completing her studies she worked at a special needs kindergarten for developmental-

ly disabled children, a job she enjoyed. But in her work she noticed that there was a disproportionately high number of children with a Roma background.

"I realised the injustices and the treatment that Roma children experience in Hungarian society. I felt that I had no choice but to try and do something about the conditions Roma children live in here in Hungary. I felt that I was needed in a different place," she says.

So Erzsébet Mohacsi quit her job at the kindergarten to channel her work towards fighting racial discrimination in Hungary.

Erzsébet took additional studies at the university in Budapest. She studied Roma Studies, a part of the university's anthropology department, thereby acquiring greater professional competence in the area. Since finishing her studies, Erzsébet has worked with Roma children. She has served as head of the Chance for Children Foundation for the past five years.

Difficult conditions

Erzsébet Mohacsi believes that segregation of Roma children at Hungarian schools is a huge problem for both Roma children and Hungarian society in general. According to Erzsébet

Mohacsi, up to one-third of all Hungarian schools segregate their students.

“Segregation of Roma children takes place at about 900 Hungarian schools. About 180 schools are exclusively Roma schools, over 700 schools have Roma classes for either all or a portion of schooling. In addition, many Roma children are placed in schools for developmentally disabled children,” she explains, pointing to a pile of papers that one of her colleagues is packing into a bag.

“We have to leave in an hour. We have received a report on a school in Taktahárkany where Roma students receive their schooling in some of the subjects on a lower level and with less educated teachers. This is the most common form of segregation, but also the one that is most difficult to combat, as it is typically justified by saying they are dealing with children who cannot keep up with the normal schooling,” she says.

Excluded from day care centres

Segregation of Roma children in schools is not the only problem. Chance for Children is fighting against. Erzsébet Mohacsi sees a significant problem in the fact that most Roma children do not attend day care centres and



therefore already lag behind at preschool age. She believes that, in principle, Romas are excluded from having their children cared for in day care centres.

“It is not because Romas do not want to put their children in day care centres, but because there is a lack of capacity in the Hungarian institutions. Romas are often unemployed

and therefore must care for their children themselves. Thus, the children who actually have the greatest need for stimulation and care are denied access,” says Erzsébet Mohacsi.

This means that the majority of Roma children do not have contact with the Hungarian education system and ethnic Hungarian children until they are six or seven years old, meaning that they are behind from the start.

“Some of the children only speak Romani and cannot speak Hungarian when they begin school. Of course, this means that they cannot keep up with the schooling and are either separated from the other children or sent to a special needs school,” she says, adding that the number of children who receive special needs schooling in Hungary is four times higher than the EU average.

Social losers

Erzsébet Mohacsi is convinced that segregation of Roma children from other children in Hungarian schools is one of the main reasons for Romas’

lack of integration into Hungarian society. Romas’ low level of schooling results in high unemployment. Many live in abject poverty, which reinforces prejudices about Romas.

According to statistics, only about 10 percent of Roma children receive a secondary education, whereas this figure is about 80 percent for ethnic Hungarian children. Erzsébet Mohacsi believes that it is time for the Hungarian society to do something about this problem.

“Segregation in Hungarian schools keeps the Roma people in the role of social losers. It reinforces the prejudices about Romas and contributes to ethnic tensions in society and the strengthening of right-wing extremist groups in society,” says Erzsébet Mohacsi.

Then, she packs her things quickly as her colleague waits for her at the door. A short time later, she is in the car and on her way to yet another school. ■

About Romas

- Romas (or gypsies) are a nomadic people who are thought to come originally from Northern India.
- They were previously nomads who lived from trading.
- From 1500 to 1700, they were subject to persecution in many parts of Europe.
- Subject to persecution during World War II, hundreds of thousands of Roma perished in Nazi concentration camps.
- The total number of Romas worldwide is estimated at 10-15 million.
- About 700,000 Romas live in Hungary, which is about 6-8 percent of the total Hungarian population. Together with Romania and Bulgaria, Hungary has the largest Roma population in the world.