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Spotlight on Voices from the Community. Education Transforms Lives: from Deep Poverty to Cultural Agent and Activist. Anikó Orsós and the Amrita Association

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Date of publication: July 15th, 2021

Edition period: March 2020- November 2021

To cite this article: Orsós , A., (2021). Education transforms lives: from deep poverty to cultural agent and activist-Anikó Orsós and the Amrita Association. *International Journal of Roma Studies*, 3(2), 209-215. doi: 10.17583/ijrs.2021.8761

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/ijrs.2021.8761>

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Spotlight on voices from the community. Education Transforms Lives: from Deep Poverty to Cultural Agent and Activist. Anikó Orsós and the Amrita Association

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Abstract

Roma women are the focus of this article and the Spotlight offers a Roma woman's testimony as a starting point. The article weaves in the personal narrative of the now director of a Roma organisation based in Hungary and combines the individual journey of Anikó Orsós, a Roma woman, educator, activist and human rights defender. Orsós is the president of Amrita Association and this paper describes the work of the association while also allowing her own reality to reflect the transformative potential of education.

Keywords: Roma, Roma woman, Education, Hungary, Activist, Amrita Association

Enfoque en las voces de la comunidad. La Educación Transforma Vidas: de la Pobreza Profunda a Agente Cultural y Activista. Anikó Orsós y la Asociación Amrita

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Resumen

Las mujeres Gitana son el tema central de este artículo y el Spotlight ofrece el testimonio de una mujer Gitana como punto de partida. El artículo teje la narrativa personal del ahora directora de una organización Gitana con sede en Hungría, y combina el viaje individual de Anikó Orsós , una mujer Gitana, educadora, activista y defensora de los derechos humanos. Orsós es la presidenta de la Asociación Amrita y este documento describe el trabajo de la asociación y también refleje el potencial transformador de la educación.

Palabras clave: Gitana, Mujer Gitana, Educación, Hungría, Activista, Asociación Amrita

My name is Anikó Orsós , I am a Beas Roma woman who was born into a family that has seven children and I was the third child. My parents worked hard all their life to make sure we grew up with dignity, keeping our culture and also ensured we were well-educated. In this article I would like to share with you my struggles and some successes which helped me to influence others and that allowed me to be seen as a leader and role model. Please note that I see myself as someone who not the best, and not necessarily special but I am hard working and a fighter, and it is this spirit that has taken me far. I believe the same is true for ‘you’ too!

I come from an impoverished place where people live in deep poverty and with low education and many around me find themselves in early marriages and are young mothers. I had my first child when I was 15 years old and was 17 years old when I had my second boy. I left school after I finished my elementary education. I would like to highlight that leaving school early or marrying young is not connected with any cultural or traditional behaviour as many stereotypical studies tend to reference and claim that this is linked to Roma traditions or culture. It is not linked to our culture but is rather a consequence of the above-mentioned social and economic status.

As my case highlights, many vulnerable girls find themselves in challenging situations and are trying to run out from the futureless poverty of their immediate realities to build a better future. At my very young age I felt lucky to have married a non-Roma guy who was 10 years older than me and who become the father of my boys. He was ‘white’ and had a job with regular income, and for me this was a way to a better future and all a girl in my situation could dream of. I thought my future was set and it could be a way to move out from the slums, have a house, sanitization, and a good school for my children. At the time I was dreaming for the future I saw of my middle-class friends. Unfortunately, this was not the case and nothing changed for me since my two sons were born on the Roma settlement in the kitchen. My boys grew up in a house where we had no toilet, lights on the street, or even running water. I would have to travel 1km each way to get water from the forest. This was the condition my 2 sons and I found ourselves in until they became adults. They attended the primary school in the village which was a 20-minute walk

from us and did this year-round. We tried to live the life as all others from the settlement and the father of the boys worked hard and I raised the two boys. One could argue that we had a bit better life than others because I tried to manage the income in a way so we did not go to ask for a loan from non-Roma neighbours or other similar types of places. We even had the possibility to travel to the neighbouring country for shopping, which at the time was unbelievable, especially for a Roma family. However, I still felt this was not enough and that I wanted more out of life. I believed and knew that my sons deserved to have the same conditions and access to the best schools, as non-Roma children and people had. I wanted to change my reality and so I fought to make those dreams come true.

My husband and I got separated and I was raising my children as a single mother in the worst situation without any support and income. I found myself in a miserable situation with two small kids, no minimum standard of living condition, no income at all, no support and no education. I couldn't see way out. I fell into a deep depression and sadness and I believed I destroyed my life and that of my sons by not thinking carefully and planning a way out of poverty before having them. At the time, I didn't want to burden to my parents as they were so poor and had others to take care of too. I knew I and understood I couldn't wait for change or help from others, so decided to do it myself. I changed everything through education and believing there was a better way. I had to stand up and do something for my boys who were at that time 5 and 7 years old.

What follows is a the what and how I made those changes. And even so, now as a mature woman I see so many young girls falling into the same situation and I know to my core that:

No marriages and/or a husband can change our future as Roma women. We are the only ones who can do this for ourselves. Our life is in our hands and we are the ones who can change it.

What and How?

I started to reform my life and search for possibilities and people who could help me to take my first steps. It was not easy at all with kids, and not having any financial savings, no education and no connection with

people in power. As I said, we are the ones who can make change, but since others are in the decision-making positions, we need them to help us achieve our goals.

First, I started looking for a job which could be done and accept the fact that I had two small boys. At the time, I was 20 years old and I worked around the local church through maintaining the garden, cleaning the church, administrating the funerals and supporting new-borns. This job allowed me the possibility to give the minimum to my children for one year but I understood that this is not enough. If the boys start school or if I want a better school and want to have a home with running water and more than one Room, where my sons can invite their classmate without feeling shame, then this job was not enough. The jobs which were available with my primary school education did not give me better options so I understood the only way is if I go back to school. But how would I do this with kids and no income?

As I meet with our priest where I was working before, he told me there was an association in Pécs, Hungary called Amrita, who can help me with getting back to school through supporting the preparations and get a scholarship for my studies.

This first step changed my all life. I got on the training for a year which prepared me for the secondary school after my long pause. I got back into the school system and took over a job at the organization as a student. During that time, I met with many same age Roma girls who were already at the good school, but they did not have kids. Seeing them gave me a hope that I can do it too. The question was what I will do with the boys? Thanks to my younger brother who always helped and supported me, and thus I finished the secondary school and started university. At this time, I got the leading position at the Amrita organization and had my boys around where they were receiving the same educational support with many youths their age.

Becoming the director of Amrita I invited young activists to shape the programmes and services based on their personal experiences and we developed the work catering to the needs of the youth in the slums and those who were most excluded. Through co-design and inviting the community into the organisation, we were able to create spaces where Roma women and youth could further their education and attain academic success.

Understanding the complexity of the problems and obstacles which are affecting the high dropout of Roma from the school system, was one of the first programmes we designed. The Association provides support and training for young Roma to help them within higher education and inclusion in the labour market. We also offer:

- language lessons which ranging from English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Beás and Lovari Gypsy language;
- leisure activities which facilitate intercultural understanding and encourage them to be open minded and better understand the world around them using sport, excursions, computer classes – ECDL courses and multicultural programmes;
- we use personal education development plans which we review every 3 months to ensure that our participants meet all requested requirements in the school system (used with Elementary, secondary and university level students);
- implement Integrated pedagogical methods training for those teachers who work with Roma, youth and our target group and stakeholders;
- we build bridges between the school- student- parents and aim to decrease school dropout rates for those in Elementary, secondary and university level students;
- we develop and carry out several projects that aim to teach both Roma and non-Roma how to fight discrimination and promote equal rights in the whole of society.

We also have organized trainings for social workers, teachers, and young people to prepare them to work together with Roma children and their families. Amrita's focus is also on upskilling our target group to be qualified to carry out the work themselves. Therefore, we teach our participants about their Roma culture and historical realities and develop their understanding of using new teaching methods to advocate for their

basic needs. At the association we involve our trainees in visiting families and schools in an effort to bridge the disconnect between them and encourage intercultural dialogue.

Among our 'classic' projects we run housing initiatives which give the possibility to Roma to improve their living conditions and decrease the number of segregated Roma settlements. We also help disadvantaged Roma people to be able to re-enter the labour market. Amrita has a community house where we run our extracurricular programmes and we provide individual lessons with bespoke plans that help develop the youth to attain academic success and decrease early school leaving.

There is an exchange programme that is run where sports and cultural activities encourage understanding and facilitate dialogue. The Amrita staff involve the families and work with them to better understand their child's educational journey and also support them through lifelong learning projects.

We put an emphasis on Roma women and girl's education because we know the future of the kids depends on her education level since she is the one who spends the most time with the kids. Involving men and boys in our work has had a profound impact too, as we develop them to not limit their wife or daughters to house work and to support them with their academic visions and dreams.

Supporting Roma mothers who want to return back to school is central to our work at Amrita. Through the association we offer a space for childcare for the mother while she is at her lessons, where we feed and provide a kindergarten teacher to teach the children. We also cooperate with high profile universities throughout the country, Europe and the UK and collectively challenge anti-Gypsyism and strengthen the integration and inclusion of the Roma families.

As has been outlined, the association carries out a range of activities and programmes that push boundaries and facilitate understanding and develop knowledge. I was fortunate to walk through the doors of Amrita and with my families support, my conviction, hard work and belief that there was a better way, I continued my studies and have been able to attend university and work in top organisations. I have been advocating and fighting for women's rights, fair education for all and demanding basic human rights for all Roma and non-Roma.

Today, I am a proud mother and I can happily say that my boys are adults now and had a great education completing university. However, I am aware that education is powerful and transformational but there is still a palpable hatred towards Roma that manifests in anti-Gypsyism. I am still discriminated, threatened and treated differently because I am Roma. My education is not visible and anti-Gypsyism still plays a significant role in my and the association's everyday reality. As long we have people who kill, discriminate, segregate and exclude based on religion, race and skin colour, we are not safe. We Roma need to educate ourselves to get in the decision-making positions so that we can shape and hold power so that we can bring about real change.

Educate, educate and educate! Stand up for your rights!

Acknowledgements

To the smartest mom who had no formal education at all, Julia Balogh.

My father who was the most equitable and family-centred man in my life, György Orsós.

My brother who changed many people's life by giving them the possibility to study at the Ambedkat Schhol, János Orsós.

My son Gábor Imre and Roland Imre, Lorena Imre they create for me the sweetest and most supportive family I could ever dream of.

Anikó Orsós is a Roma woman, graduate in Human Management, working in the education field since 1999. Studying for one year at the Helsingor International People Huse and St. Giles International College, Brighton, UK. Working for 4 years at the Ministry of Education at the integration network, helping to develop new educational methods, then train teachers how to implement the approach. Since 2009, she works at European Roma Rights Centre as the Women's Rights Officer. For years she has been developing activities related to human rights with a specific gender perspective. Orsós has been leading a workshop titled "Annual Global South Women's Forum on Sustainable development workshop on integrated/segregated and special education" and has prepared and drafted policy and submission documents related to women's rights, implementing workshops in Germany on Strategic Litigation and Anti-Discrimination. She has also led international workshops and implemented during Roma week in the UK, a lecture on Sexual and Reproductive Health of Romani Women in Europe. In Gent, Brussels she delivered a series of workshops on Intersectionality in education and early marriage / early pregnancy/ early childbearing as a serious health risk for mother and child. She has travelled throughout Europe and abroad educating and training individuals and institutions on Roma, women's rights and advocacy. Orsós writes expert opinions and recommendations on the historical and current situation of Romany Women in Europa for the European Parliament in cooperation with European Economic and Social Committee.

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