

The Missing Voice. Sinti Families, Socio-Educational Services and Attempts at Inclusion

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Abstract: The lack of inclusion of the Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (RSC) populations within the Italian social tissue is a social problem that still exists, although more than ten years have passed since the definition of the National Strategy for the Inclusion of the RSC Populations (2011). This strategy called for actions at various levels in the welfare system to guarantee the protection of the rights of these communities, which are widely present in the territory and still stigmatised. Through a case study, the narrations of the members of a Sinti clan were collected. The studied group consisted of 54 people of which 29 minors, residing in a camp in the Veneto Region, and of some institutional actors from the same territory (a social worker, an educator and two teachers). The aim of the study was to understand the different points of view with respect to the themes defined as central by the strategy, namely: work, housing, health and education. The interviews show a reality that is still far from the construction of participatory social policies, able to include these subjects as primary interlocutors for the definition of intervention projects and not as mere beneficiaries. Social work is not yet fully capable of guaranteeing this minority the right to advocacy, although, it is true that some attempts at inclusion emerge.

Keywords: Sinti population; Inclusion; Social services; Participation; Case-study

Introduction

Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (RSC)¹ populations represent the largest existing “galaxy of minorities” (Vitale and dell’Agnese 2007, p.125), with an estimated presence of approximately 12 million people in the world, among the 7,200,000 and 8,700,000 in Europe (Spinelli, 2003). As there are no official statistics, it is estimated that Roma people in our country should be between 110,000 and 180,000, as indicated in the Conclusive Report of the Senate’s Investigation into the Condition of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (2011). It is important to underline that the umbrella term ‘Roma’ indicates groups that are distinguished on the basis of geographical origin, linguistic origin, religion and, more generally, of traditions (Sigona, 2007). There are two labels that have been (and are still often) used to define and bring together these peoples: the derogatory heteronym “gypsies”, which indicates “a fairly composite variety of people, with notable cultural differences, whose only common trait it consisted, perhaps, in a negative stigmatization on the part of those who did not consider themselves gypsies” (Piasere, 2004, p.3); the polythetic category “nomads”, which is applied regardless of whether they are Italian or foreign citizens, travelers or sedentary, recognized refugees, asylum seekers, regular immigrants, irregular, stateless (Sigona, 2007), although only a residual percentage of these today they still practice an itinerant lifestyle (Pasta and Vitale, 2018).

According to the mapping conducted in 2021 by Associazione 21 Luglio, and given an unspecified number of Roma subjects present in Italy, it is possible to quantify at around 17,800 units the people living in a housing emergency and more precisely in formal slums, informal slums, in micro settlements, in collection centers. It is also estimated that 55% of these people are under 18 years old.

The lack of certain data regarding the presence of these populations is not a peculiar Italian feature on the contrary it is common to all the countries of the Union, since the only way to map their presence consists of self-ascription. This leads to an absence of information regarding the levels of education and unemployment, life expectancy and infant mortality, housing situation and unemployment rate as well as the percentage of foreigners and stateless people and their access to welfare services (Carbone, 2017). The few existing researches are restricted to a local basis, therefore they do not allow us to specifically analyse the problems experienced by these groups and, above all, to concretely evaluate the outcomes of any support policies implemented.

¹ Within this paper, the term Roma will be predominantly used, in line with the choice of the European Commission, which uses it in its documents, while being aware of the differences existing between the various minorities.

However, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights has highlighted, through the 2008 and 2016 investigations on Minorities and Discrimination (EU-MIDIS), the persistence of important inequalities, together with a high level of social exclusion of these populations. Particularly, they result excluded from the education system (Cashman, 2017; Calzoni, 2001), from the labour market (this resulting in high levels of poverty), from healthcare (Aiello, Flecha & Serrader, 2018; Flecha, 2013; McFadden et al., 2018) and from the attention of social services (Cemlyn, 2008; Lorenzetti, 2017).

In fact, over 10 years after the definition of the National Strategy for the inclusion of RSC populations in implementation of the European Union communication no. 173/2011, Italy can count only few concrete interventions that have been implemented to encourage the inclusion of Roma in the social environment. The gap regards especially the lack of school integration, which is at the basis of the perpetuation of the mechanisms of stigmatization and marginalization of these communities. Studies that directly involve Roma populations are residual, especially in the social work's field (Valero et al., 2021), although these minorities have long been the subject of political and social debate and their presence is strongly rooted in the territory.

With the aim of offering a contribution to the reflection on attempts at inclusion of Roma populations, through a case study, the experiences of the members of a Sinti community residing in the Italian North-East and the opinions of some institutional actors involved were collected, with respect to the thematic areas defined as priorities by the Strategy, i.e. work, housing, health and education.

A look at 10 years since the implementation of the Strategy for Inclusion in Italy

Italian public opinion has long been concerned with the “gypsy question” mainly as a social problem linked to various critical issues (nomadism, presence of camps, public health and hygiene, social marginality), with a mostly negative or emergency meaning which reflects the “anti-gypsy policies” that have accompanied Italy for years. So much so that Italy is still defined as “the country of camps” (European Roma Rights Centre, 2000), given the presence of mono-ethnic settlements resulting from policies which continue to provide for a parallel and non-inclusive housing system of Roma in the social context, often below the minimum standards in terms of adequacy of housing compared to national and international regulations.

The Italian state did not develop policies for Roma communities with a minimum level of coherence and articulation until 2011 when, driven by the need to respond to the EU framework for national integration strategies, it began to implement some policy lines. The first national strategy for the

inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (SNIR) aimed to respond mainly to the problems of forced evictions, for a time span that includes the years 2012-2020. The need for governmental coordination of the interventions to be carried out at national, regional and local level has led to the definition of a national Contact Point (called UNAR - Office for the promotion of equal treatment and the removal of discrimination based on race and ethnic origin), which has, in turn, established an inter-ministerial control room made up of representatives of different Ministries, the Conference of Presidents of the Regions, the Union of Italian Provinces and the National Association of Italian Municipalities. UNAR, after having consulted the representatives of the regional and local administrations and the main Roma associations, drafted the text of the Strategy (SNIR, n.173/2011)², formally sending it to the European Commission on 28 February 2012 (Bortone, 2016). The Strategy proposed as a general objective the promotion of equal treatment and the economic and social inclusion of the three communities, the improvement of their daily living conditions, the promotion of participation in their social development and, finally, the guarantee of full enjoyment of citizenship rights through four reference areas (work, housing, health and education), to be developed through inter-ministerial coordination and through regional tables and municipal inclusion plans (ibidem, 2016).

The Strategy project has been monitored and evaluated over the years to understand whether the activities and actions undertaken were appropriate and led to the achievement of the set objectives. In particular, the *Roma Civic Monitor* project studied the Strategy and evaluated its progress: despite some exceptions in some regions, overall there has been no evident improvement regarding the integration of Roma into the social tissue and problems related to the implementation of the SNIR remain (Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the SNIR, 2020)³. As underlined in the final report, the Strategy “has proven to be an ineffective tool due to the inefficiency of local authorities, but also due to the lack of an adequate central coordination system” (Jo Cox Commission, 2017, p.93).

The scenario in which the SNIR operates is in fact disorganized and heterogeneous, devoid of ad-hoc national legislation and, above all, local and regional authorities have the power to decide whether and which interventions to implement, resulting in contradictory and counterproductive outcomes that fuel the policies and discriminatory practices. As an example, Regional Law 61/2019 of the Piemonte Region proposed to protect the Roma people by approving the “Regulations regarding the regulation of nomad-

² Retrieved from: <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/associazione-e-agricoltura/focus-on/integration-rom-sinti-e-caminanti/Documents/Strategia%20Nazionale.pdf>

³ Retrieved from: <https://cps.ceu.edu/sites/cps.ceu.edu/files/attachment/basicpage/3034/rcm-civil-society-monitoring-report-3-italy-2019-eprint-it.pdf>

ism and the fight against illegal activity”, the aim of which was to abolish the Roma camps without, however, proposing alternative housing solutions (Civil society monitoring report on the implementation of the SNIR, 2020). Only Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany regions approved a regional law and an ordinance in order to close the Roma camps and promote different housing solutions. On the contrary, there are local and regional authorities that not only do not implement the SNIR, but also have denied it, maintaining or opening new nomad camps or mono-ethnic areas.

The housing problem is the central element that implements the vicious circuit of the exclusion of these families: life in the camps, in fact, without toilets, located in marginal places, keeps the Roma communities out of the social tissue. These conditions significantly influence access to health and educational services and, consequently, also to the job market. Illiteracy and school dropout continue to have much higher rates than the population average, as do unemployment and inactivity rates (Milcher, 2006; Ringold, Orenstein & Wilkens, 2005).

Research

Aims and methodology

The research, which is part of the panorama of qualitative studies, was born from the desire to know the social situation perceived by the members of a Sinti community residing within a camp in the Veneto Region⁴. To achieve this aim, we chose to use the case study methodology, which is a useful and functional way to analyze complex phenomena and yet restricted units of analysis (Yin, 2014). The objective was to understand the perspective of Sinti families and some institutional actors considered significant in the inclusion of these subjects (such as social workers, educators and teachers) regarding the 4 areas of intervention defined by the SNIR: work, housing, education and health.

The tool used⁵ was the semi-structured narrative interview, useful for collecting life biographies, information, establishing facts and providing testimonies that are as authentic as possible (Bichi 2002). Four different inter-

⁴ The Sinti community involved in the research is the recipient of a pilot project called “Beyond the Camp: paths for possible inclusion”, promoted by the Pastoral Union in collaboration with the Municipality, the school institution, Banca Etica and various third sector entities with the general objective of implementing interventions that can promote a better quality of life for the people residing in the camp, as well as promote their inclusion within the social fabric to which they belong. This contribution analyzes some of the outcomes conducted within a broader research project that studied the opinion of the Sinti Community also regarding the project and the health area.

⁵ To collect further data which will not be presented in the article, in-depth interviews and documentary analysis of the social files present in the municipal Social Service were used.

view tracks were defined, depending on the recipients: one track for adult members, one track for children, one for social workers and educators, one for teachers. The 4 previously listed thematic areas were discussed with the adult members, with the children the experience of education was investigated, while with the institutional actors, the focus was on the methods of inclusion and relationships. The interviews were collected during the first half of 2021, audio-recorded and transcribed, subsequently subjected to textual content analysis through the Weft QDA Software, in order to identify the macro-categories necessary to understand the phenomenon in question.

Context analysis

In order to understand the framework in which the study was developed, it appears necessary to provide a description of the general characteristics of the Sinti community residing in the camp⁶. This community belongs to the Taic group of Slovenian origins and has resided in the area for over 30 years, first nomadic and then sedentary. During the first years, the family consisted of a couple together with some children who, over time, became 10, forming the basis of what they themselves define as a “clan”. The municipal administration identified a suitable place for the placement of this minority, creating a nomadic camp bordering the bank of a stream, the power plant and the municipal landfill. The presence of industries, the distance from the town center and from shops selling basic necessities, have made the context marginalizing on a social level and unhealthy from a hygienic point of view, in line with the characteristics of Italian camps. There are still no connections for the supply of water, gas and electricity (only a small number of resident families have them), nor actual toilets. The population is made up of 54 people divided into 12 families: all are Italian citizens, born in Italy, precisely in Veneto. Analyzing the socio-demographic features, there is a gender balance, with a slight dominance of women, 28 out of 54. Regarding age, there is a large presence of minors (29 out of 54). The most elderly is a 70 year old woman who is also the progenitor, while the majority of adults are in the 21-30 year old range. The reasons that lead this community to be made up predominantly of young people and minors is a consequence of several aspects: first of all, the importance attributed to the family, as the central element of the clan. In order to form a new family unit and move on to the status of adult according to the Sinti culture, the individual boy or girl must have a child: this leads adolescents to invest in their love life from a very young age, causing them to become parents when they are not yet able to exercise parental responsibility with the consequent need to appeal to the Juvenile Court where the judge appoints a guardian, most often the grandparents,

⁶ This information was found thanks to the interview with the privileged witness and the information provided by the social worker in charge of monitoring the camp members.

for the newborn child. Furthermore, there is a high level of consanguinity among the residents, given the lack of integration with the external context. This results in important health problems among the newborns and the presence of cognitive and physical deficits. In terms of health, according to the data present in the social records, 48 people show cognitive difficulties, 4 physical difficulties and 7 have chronic health problems: however only one person is certified with law no.104/92, indicating the presence of disability.

Regarding education, 11 children aged 6-10 years are enrolled in school, which indicates that school attendance begins with lower primary school, 6 children aged 11-14 years and 4 adolescents aged 15 to 18 years, attending lower secondary schools, for a total of 21 minors. All minors have school certification which allows them to have a support teacher. Finally, in relation to the social aspects, only 6 people work: one person has a regular job, one person carries out a work internship, 4 people carry out self-employed and/or occasional jobs; while 6 people benefit from income support and 2 people receive a pension. With regards to the housing issue, only one family lives in a wooden house, the remaining part of the population in containers and caravans; 8 families submitted an application for public housing.

The subjects involved

Participation in the research was requested in a completely free manner, without identifying specific characteristics among the subjects, precisely to encourage the widest possible participation. The interviews with adults involved 6 women and 2 men. The average age of the participants was 25, which is highly representative of the entire population; regarding civil status, only two people declare themselves married, the others define themselves as cohabiting. All interviewees have at least one child and 3 of them are expecting another, for a total of 14 children. There were 5 minors interviewed with the consent of their parents: 1 male and 1 female aged 9, 1 girl aged 12, and 1 boy aged almost 17. Finally, regarding the institutional subjects involved, the social worker has been working in the area for 27 years and is 50 years old. The educator, 45 years old, has been working with the Sinti group since 2017 but with previous experience in the same sector and finally there are two support teachers from the higher institute in which some teenagers have been included.

Main results

Work: an attempt to break away from the culture of origin

With reference to job opportunities, it is highlighted at a European level that the proportion of Roma employed in unskilled occupations is the highest, when compared with the prevailing populations, regardless of the

level of education. Being Roma, in fact, reduces the possibility of finding a job equal to one's education, although it is necessary to remember that the level of education of these populations tends to be very low. In current Western society, work constitutes a fundamental element of individual life, as it allows personal fulfilment and guarantees a certain social status, allowing access to diversified lifestyles and the construction of networks, useful for increasing one's human and social capital. The analysis of the interviews highlights a general recognition of the importance of work in daily life: for all those interviewed work is fundamental, at least at an ideal level, because it allows them to obtain the necessary income for managing their family.

“Work means a lot because then I can buy for my children what they want. I can buy things for the children, because I don't have the house, I don't have the bills to pay.” (Interview 6, Female, 36 years old)

“It's very important, if for example they give me a sewing job, I accept it. If they gave me a job it would be important to me, more than anything, I would like it very much. Also for my family... instead of staying at home... yes I also have children, but I would also like to buy things for them.” (Interview 7, Female, 19 years old).

While recognizing the importance of accessing the world of work and, consequently, making themselves available to social services in order to improve or expand their skills, in practice the majority of individuals delay attending internships or similar activities, adducing motivations such as *“having young children to look after”* (only two work placements were activated). Furthermore, there is no desire to find a job independently: the interviewees place many expectations in the help of social workers, completely delegating the research. Social worker and educator highlight the need to deal with the issue of work primarily, since it is through finding stable employment that the Sinti can begin to integrate more into the social tissue, both in terms of relationships and with respect to the possibility of becoming autonomous in managing their families. Work is what allows you to make a *“quantum leap”* with which you obtain recognition of your role in the social context and the possibility of detaching yourself from the all-encompassing dimension of life in the camp.

“Work gives dignity. Work allows you to have the money to buy clothes for your children and to be able to have a house, where you can wash your children and make them go to school in order. It is the area, in my opinion, that given their difficulties, is least accessible.” (Educator)

“If they start working, they start needing a driving license. They must start moving and therefore avoid that dependence on the camp and that inbreeding that we were talking about. That is, it is when you have an income and a role that you also begin to have the possibility of building

something, otherwise you will always remain there dependent, always there in the camp. Work work work!” (Social worker)

A further element of analysis concerns a declared change from a cultural point of view: the Sinti culture requires a man to carry out a job (which usually coincides with the collection of iron and copper) with the task of obtaining the income necessary for the maintenance of the family,, while the role of women is dedicated to managing household chores and caring for children. Interviewees report a different vision of gender roles belonging to their community in recent years.

“Once upon a time there were only men who went to collect iron, once upon a time there was no work. We women were at home, cooking, putting things away, cleaning and looking after children. But then this Sinti ritual broke down, we got it into our heads that we too had to do something.” (Interview 6, Female, 36 years old)

In Sinti culture it is the women who take care of cleaning, in short, the house, the cleaning of children. But now we have changed a little because men do it too (laughs). I have a son who takes care of the children more than his wife (laughs). And in the Sinti culture this wasn't done once. It was, let's say, absolutely forbidden for males to see a diaper and change babies.” (Interview 0, Female, 70 years old)

A historically widespread thought is that the prevalent occupation of the Roma populations is begging: this is actually a very important activity, which requires skills linked to verbal and non-verbal communication, a profound knowledge of the territory and its economic potential and a very high system of family collaboration, as it involves multiple members (Baldino, 2021). Only one interviewee talks about this work in relation to the difficulties she had during the lockdown periods following the Covid-19 pandemic. This woman explains that it was “*a disaster*” because, although her husband could luckily to work, all the other members of the family had to stay at home and could not go “*a mangel, mangel, which means begging*”. Therefore, they had to turn to their savings to manage the family's needs. From this narration, it emerges that almsgiving is an activity practiced among the members of the camp, however not told probably due to a factor of social desirability.

Certainly, there is a general difficulty on the part of the interviewees in finding regular and stable employment. This difficulty also derives from the absence of any professional qualification, which can be obtained by completing an educational path. In addition to this, cognitive and physical deficits or particular health problems, despite the support also requested from the Employment Centers, limit and hinder entry into the world of regular work. This involves seeking out non-regular jobs, such as collecting and reselling iron, or tasks through personal acquaintances.

“About 1 month ago I went to a job interview because I also registered at the employment center. They immediately set up a job interview for me, I went but I am trained to be a porter and street cleaner... instead they offered me a job in the factory. I say: “I’ll try, I’ll try”. I went for the interview and they saw my CV, they said: “no, you can’t work 8 hours”; Now I’m waiting for other work calls though... I specialize in grape harvest, porter, street sweeper, iron collection.” (Interview 4, Male, 30 years old)

A further complexity lies in the lack of a driving license. In particular, the interviewees explain that the absence of a driving license does not allow them to move around by their own means to look for work opportunities and, at the same time, nowadays the driving license is one of the requirements requested by employers of work for hiring. 20 out of 25 adults do not have it because they find it difficult to take the exam quizzes, since they cannot read. Consequently, there is difficulty in individual mobility and a strong dependence on older family members who possess it, with the *de facto* impossibility of leaving the community and creating new relationships.

Housing: the camp that becomes home

The housing issue is a very complex topic, resulting from Italian policies that have made camps the solution par excellence for Roma populations. At the same time, public administrations are now working hard on finding new and different solutions. From the narratives we understand that, although life in the camp shows aspects of difficulty, for the majority of residents it represents “home” and therefore they underline the need to make changes to improve it: fixing the potholes in the access road, adapting all the containers, caravans and campers of connections to the main services such as water, electricity, gas or change the location, while remaining within a “camp” context with a lot of garden available where you can feel free and let the children play.

Recently, the introduction of a laundry container, repeatedly highlighted as positive by those interviewed, has given the possibility of washing oneself and one’s clothes, improving the management of personal hygiene, not depending on paid laundries and avoiding the use of clothes in a “disposable” mode. However, there are 3 people who explicitly report the need to change their living conditions because they feel the need to reduce the distance from the town center and live in a cleaner place:

“For me, a house is important, that’s it. To be closer to the square, closer to the school. Because L. (son) finds it difficult to go up and down to school, it’s a long way. Let’s hope we move forward with the application for public housing. And then it’s also easy for me because I only have 2 children, I don’t need a big house.” (Interview 5, Female, 30 years old)

“Where we live there is a lot of dust. When you drive by the dust rises, so we have to turn the caravans with the door on the opposite side, because otherwise you can’t eat because the dust gets in. Then when you walk you get all the dust on you and there are lots of holes. Nothing, a house is better.” (Interview 7, Female, 19 years old)

Therefore, the positive and negative aspects of living in the camp and in a conventional home were explored in depth. The elements that primarily emerge are the comfort of the conventional home, having all the functional tools available for a basic daily life: water, gas, heating, a functioning kitchen; all counterbalanced by negative factors, such as: the presence of rules that oblige silence in particular time slots, cohabitation with neighbors and the absence of a garden, in the case that one goes to live in an apartment.

Mainly, the interviews highlight the awareness that life in the camp is completely different from that lived in a conventional house, also in terms of the investment necessary for its management. Those interviewed report that they have nevertheless applied for public housing, although the actual desire to move from the camp is not clearly stated, as also reported by the social worker.

“Even the housing issue, everyone says that “they want public housing” but entering a house means paying bills, keeping it clean, respecting the neighbors, using a washing machine. I don’t know if they question themselves and ask themselves this, but they ask for the house. They could say: “no, I absolutely don’t want the house, give me another camp, I’ll move there with my family and I’ll manage the space around it. I’ll arrange it myself, you give me water, electricity and gas and I’m happy in my camper”. It would already be an evolution from everyone being there. But no, they are asking for a house, therefore, either the system of the people around them has oriented them to ask for public housing, because it is the easiest answer, or there is a real expectation. A different ideal of life within four walls, but without the awareness of what it means, because they have never tried.” (Social worker)

Health: the lack of trust in territorial healthcare and the absence of prevention

Some researches show that Roma people have a significantly worse state of health than people of the same age, sex and economic status (Parry et al., 2007), presenting a high frequency of genetic diseases and congenital defects (Trevisan, 2004), with higher infant morbidity and mortality rates and lower vaccination coverage (Save the Children Italia Onlus, 2008). Similarly, the medium life expectancy is ten years lower compared to that of the Italian population (Association 21 July 2022): this is mainly due to the difficult relationship with the healthcare system (Alunni, 2017), poor hygiene and housing conditions, as well as the lack of prevention (Perocco, 2016).

Overall, the interviewees confirmed a lack of trust in the healthcare system, in particular with regards to Primary care physicians and pediatricians: they prefer not to go to these subjects for checks or to ask for support in case of need. On the contrary, they report that they turn more favorably to the town's pharmacies in the case of small needs or, in cases considered more serious, directly to the emergency room. In this sense, the idea of prevention is completely missing, with access to treatment only in high-risk situations; this also happens with regards to pregnancies; in fact, women say they only go to the gynecologist if they experience some problems. If they "feel well", it is not necessary.

"When children are sick we take them to the hospital, straight to the hospital, we don't do any pediatric visits, straight to the hospital... we are always afraid... if someone is sick it's better to take them to the hospital and not wait too long" (Interview 5, Female, 30 years old).

The direct method of access to the emergency room is also highlighted by the educator, who reports having captured a general fear on the part of the Sinti population towards doctors, to whom they rarely appear. The social worker, on the other hand, declares that she has never been contacted or involved by the health services for any collaboration or reports regarding these people, nor by the Sinti directly to request information, believing that they take action independently for health issues.

Individual experiences have a strong impact on the relationship with the healthcare system: those who have built a relationship of trust with some doctor are also more aware of the importance of their own health; on the other hand, negative experiences seem to influence the entire community.

"But the other doctors were liars because they didn't say what the little girl had. They said he only had one problem but instead she has two problems and they didn't tell us things well... they told me she only had a stomach problem and then I learned that she had another illness... but I later found out known" (Interview 7, Female, 19 years old)

Finally, social worker and educator brought to light two other topics that were not raised by the narratives of the Sinti: the first concerns the problem of consanguinity, while the second lies in the appeal and use of L.68/99 (Law on the right to work of disabled people) and certifications in general. The problem of consanguinity is a characteristic trait of the Sinti population interviewed, due to incest resulting from relationships between first cousins, with the main consequence of cognitive and physical deficits in children of the new generations.

Connected to this, a further point of reflection is raised by the social worker in relation to medical certifications that could help people improve their living conditions. For example, this could involve submitting an ap-

plication for civil disability or for Law 68/99. Both are not requested by the interested parties, probably due to the fear of being labeled as “disabled” or due to a lack of knowledge of what follows from the submission of the application. They often do not consider that if the physical and/or mental conditions are unable to satisfy specific requests, especially in the workplace, the presentation of these certifications could be functional.

Overall, the positive data regarding this area lies in the improvement of hygienic conditions of Sinti families and also of the awareness reported regarding this topic. There is a sense of trust in the healthcare system in general, especially linked to hospital settings, while there is difficulty in accessing basic care, perhaps because there is less attention to prevention and control aspects, although many subjects, including young people, suffer from multiple pathologies. There is a clear need to work with this community on the issues of prevention and recognition of pathologies in terms of certifications and benefits.

Education: the vision of learning “to survive” in everyday life

Currently, in the Italian context there are many problems linked to the limited school attendance of Roma minors, with a consequent low level of schooling and integration into the social tissue. The causes of this condition are many: among which we can highlight deficiencies and difficulties in learning, memorisation, reading and writing, poor lexical knowledge (Farkas, 2014; Turatti, 2007), but also job insecurity, segregation, marginality and conditions of poverty (Di Noia, 2016) which do not facilitate access to the education system. The emerging themes in this sense concern the importance attributed to education, scholastic inclusion, the main problems encountered and, finally, the vision and perception of the future.

The interviewees report the general importance of education, even if practically this appears limited to the acquisition of basic reading, writing and calculation skills, useful for the individual daily life. It does not seem to be a structured concept like that of Italian society where long-term investment is preferred.

“For me, for our children, it is very important because we educate our children from an early age. Education is very important, because then you know how to handle things. How to sign, even papers. Sometimes I find it a little difficult to manage things because I haven’t studied.” (Interview 4, Male, 30 years old)

This interpretation of education is also underlined by the teachers: they explain, in fact, that the value attributed to education is mainly connected to the acquisition of basic practical skills and a curiosity towards the outside world. A critical issue reported is the parental inability to stimulate, support

and help their children in this journey of discovery due to the illiteracy and lack of general knowledge that characterizes previous generations.

“What emerges is that the family does not seem to give much value and importance to education. However, they are proud if some of their children know multiplication tables well. For example, a phrase that the mother of one of them said to me stuck in my mind. I was complimenting because one of the boys seems to give a lot of value to education: he cares about it, he comes with his things. His mother recognized these abilities and was proud. For them this is very difficult, difficult things so, maybe they give value to education but they certainly don’t support the children, they don’t help them, they don’t support them... (...) Let’s say that education isn’t really important, it can be a tool for understanding something but they’re not even that interested in wanting to know. For example, understanding well what a text says is not that important in their opinion, because in my opinion there is someone who mediates for them, sometimes, so... instead they are curious about the concepts, to know, I don’t know. .. the universe, seeing places in the world... they are curious about these things. But they don’t even have geographical knowledge, in the sense... it’s a very separate world. In my opinion they obviously have no stimuli at home, other than those inherent to their reality.” (Teacher 2)

With regard to scholastic inclusion, referring to the stories of adults and minors, it is highlighted that access to the world of education takes place starting from lower primary school, at the age of 6 and not in kindergarten. Therefore socialization with non-Roma peers begins late, when other children have already learned some of the basic skills useful for school. Also for this reason, insertion into classes is complex: from the interviews it stands out that participation in the “class” environment is always very limited. From an early age, children spend a lot of time outside the classroom with support teachers to acquire basic skills and only rarely do they attend and spend time with peers.

“In short, I was never in class, I was always outside... in a room for us. The teacher took me to drink a coffee, to eat a sandwich and I had some money, but she told me: “I’ll pay you”. Then I only spent an hour in class all day to get to know my classmates. There were 3 male and 2 female classmates who were my friends” (Interview 7, Female, 19 years old)

Despite this, they report that relationships with classmates, when present, have been positive but never continuous over the years, because they are not valued and developed outside the school environment, although these families are sedentary and therefore there are no difficulties related to moves of residence. Even with reference to the teachers, who are mainly supportive, everyone reports that the relationships established are positive because the teachers have always been attentive to their needs, they were

“good and kind”. The method that involves keeping Sinti minors separated from their classmates is also confirmed by the teachers, regardless of the age and cognitive abilities of the individuals. The motivation connected to this choice is identified in the desire to first of all encourage and implement school attendance, proposing workshops and personalized courses that may be of interest to children linked to the spheres of daily life and more concrete than the canonical lessons in the classroom. Furthermore, a difficulty with respect to inclusion is highlighted, both in terms of knowledge and skills, which are very distant from those of their peers: since the Sinti children do not have the ability to understand most of the topics covered in class, remaining in the classroom results unattractive and stimulating for them; and with respect to the very precarious hygiene issue, for which a change of clothing was also proposed for the duration of the school day.

“We had thought of a project that could make them attend a little more and engage them a little more and this included both a welcome part with breakfast, with a possible change of clothing, which could then also facilitate entry into the classroom, making it more adequate. We had thought about some projects, so there was the cooking workshop, the money workshop, the IT workshop... and they liked this, they started to come a little more. While they had not agreed, for example, to change their clothing and therefore the class aspect was still difficult. Since they didn't come to class much, for example, sometimes classmates took part in the cooking workshop, so we tried to start a little like that.” (Teacher 1)

Consequently, it is highlighted that school inclusion is still very limited and difficult to promote by teaching staff. Above all, the presence of protocols or operational practices for the inclusion of these minors does not emerge, therefore the management of the activities and methods is completely delegated to the individual teacher. In addition to the difficulties of insertion and the strong disparity in terms of knowledge and skills, it is possible to bring up two other problems highlighted in the interviews: drop-out and certifications. As regards drop-out, the school career ends with early abandonment when the children turn sixteen, due to the need to respond to family needs but also for an idea of short-term education.

“When I was 16 my dad went to sign and took me out of school because my mum couldn't manage things at home on her own. She couldn't do the work alone, because my brothers were there. My brothers started working with my dad and I stayed at home to help my mom with the younger children.” (Interview 7, Female, 19 years old)

“I stayed at home to help my mother, I did the household chores at home, I washed the dishes, I cooked when my mother went to school to pick up or bring my brothers. Then I washed clothes, put the container away, then cleaned outside, put it away.” (Interview 3, Male, 19 years old)

The certifications represents a particularly heated topic, on which all professionals expose themselves, albeit with different perspectives. The teachers who work in direct contact with the children highlight that, although certifications are necessary because the minors have objective cognitive difficulties, these are drawn up “en masse” without any distinction between them, thus eliminating their subjectivity.

“In my opinion, even the diagnoses that exist are made en masse. If I may, it’s not to criticize anyone’s work, but I have two boys in mind at the moment and they have nothing to do with it: one definitely needs a full coverage, all hours, because in my opinion his situation is serious on a cognitive level. While for the other, four hours of support are more than enough, because he would be independent, he would need support but like a foreign boy who arrives, he needs support to understand the language but then he would manage. They are two totally different individuals who are bureaucratically managed the same way.” (Teacher 2)

The educator highlights the limitations that certifications bring to minors, since they are a further tool through which the minor - who already has the label of being Roma - is labeled. These tools often become obstacles for potentially talented children, because expectations on them drop drastically.

“They are always considered almost disabled; it is true that they have cognitive deficits but not all of them and too often the school uses school certifications to give hours of support and not deal with them. But it cannot be about giving hours of support to everyone, that is, you must give them to those children who need it most, even among the Sinti as among us. There are kids who are labelled, you put a label with school support, and it’s hard to be a gypsy and also have the labels of disability. In the sense that it’s really very heavy, especially for a child to deal with. And they are certified and therefore less and less is expected from them and in my opinion no, it should be the school that tries to expect more and more from them too”. (Educator)

The social worker reports a different perspective on the use of certifications, as they are welcomed and accepted by the Sinti population because, although the certification “is part of a disability profile”, they have learned that it is only through it that they have the opportunity to have a support teacher who is a constant point of reference for them, which they otherwise wouldn’t have.

Finally, we tried to understand what the future prospects were regarding life and dreams in terms of work and investment: what emerges is that few adults have a certain vision of what their daily lives will be like, especially among young people who hope to find stable employment and are interested in participating in training and educational courses. Among minors, however, there are children who express the desire to become an artist, a teacher, a

mechanic or follow in the footsteps of their working parent. No one, however, says they want to continue their school career to deepen their skills and knowledge in order to be able to carry out their “dream” job, which appears to be available in their imagination through everyday life experiences, not through training trajectories.

Concluding remarks

The present study, albeit within the limits that characterize it, has made it possible to collect the narratives of the members of a community still highly discriminated against in our country, which is rarely given a voice. “Stereotypes about Roma and Sinti are so strong that they often push others to speak in their place, making the stereotype or discriminatory practice speak without gathering the voice of those directly involved, thus contributing to diminishing their capacity for action and interpretation” (Pasta & Vitale 2018, p.223). In this sense, it is believed that the research itself is a positive outcome compared to an initial process of inclusion of this specific group residing in Veneto, since, although some subjects demonstrated their resistance to joining, 13 people actively participated thanks to the intermediation carried out by social services, proving collaborative and interested in providing their opinion. Certainly the main limitation is linked precisely to the low number of participants: however, considering that the clan is made up primarily of minors and that the internal organizational dimension is linked to family units, it is believed that the number of interviewees is sufficient to propose an initial reflection on this specific population, typically difficult to reach. Secondly, it is important to take into account the factor of social desirability of the responses (Kelman, 2004; Feygina & Tyler, 2009): given the very high stigmatization experienced by these populations, the narrative could be oriented towards expressing “what is right” in relation to the socio-cultural milieu seen as legitimizing, i.e. the “non-Roma” one.

The results highlight some contradictions between what is narrated and the actions concretely implemented by the Sinti, such as for example the abstract importance of school which then does not find application in the attendance of minors, rather than the need to find stable employment and the non take action to find it. On the other hand, the lack of investment in terms of policies and projects in favor of these communities has had and still results in the impossibility for these groups to take root within the social tissue: as underlined by Liégeois (2007) programmatic policies in favor of these minorities have always been influenced by local and electoral needs, which in fact have led to acting mainly in emergency terms. The idea that Roma communities are marginal precisely because they are effectively excluded in an indirect manner from a real possibility of integration, also appears to be

truthful in this context, first and foremost starting from the school system, which is a necessary starting point for acquiring cultural codes necessary to read society and detach ourselves from the still permanent stereotyped vision (Bortone, 2016). The activation of dedicated bottom-up projects therefore appears necessary, precisely to open a communication channel that does not see the Roma as simple beneficiaries of interventions, but as actors in a process of involvement and change starting from their specific needs: in this sense, the role of institutions and in particular of social services can be fundamental in building a relationship that allows us to mediate and collaborate with other subjects, such as schools and the world of work, to start what should become a possible inclusion. These communities should in fact be involved right from the planning stage of the interventions aimed at them, and not just be put in the position of possible membership in the implementation phase. Finally, we want to underline the need to implement studies and research on these populations, especially in the field of social work, in which the issues of *advocacy* and of participation in connection with minority rights are strongly developing (Iovu, 2021), precisely in order to be able to build different actions and projects calibrated to the specific needs of these citizens.

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