

ROMA RIGHTS

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CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

“They become stigmatised in their own family” - Interview with a Roma LGBTQ activist David Tišer

David Tišer is Director of the non-profit organisation ARA ART, and he is the author of the first comprehensive study on Roma LGBTQ in the Czech Republic called Homosexuality in the Romani Community. He graduated in Romani Studies from Charles University, Prague.

ERRC: You are leading ARA ART, the only organisation in the Czech Republic devoted to the rights of the Roma LGBTQ. Why do you think Czech Roma need an organisation like yours?

David Tišer: I think the world cares about people being oppressed either within the LGBTQ or in the Roma community, but there isn't any kind of research or study that would provide enough information about the Roma-LGBTQ minority. When there is a debate in a given country around LGBTQ issues, that debate is mainly focused on LGBTQ people within the majority society and their integration. But LGBTQ people in the Roma minority suffer from multiple cases of discrimination - they are subject to discrimination because of being Roma and being not heterosexual. It is completely depressing for those who are affected.

They have huge difficulties even in the Roma community, which clings to traditional family patterns and rejects homosexuality. It is very hard being a Roma and belonging to the LGBTQ group - people from the Roma-LGBTQ community do not even contact each other in person, only for example through the Internet.

You mentioned during the roundtable discussion that you have been fighting for Roma LGBTQ rights for 8 years now. Unfortunately you couldn't get in touch with Roma communities concerning this issue for over 4 years. Why?

It wasn't easy to gain trust in the Roma community with LGBTQ issues. It took 4 years until they started to trust me. The field research I did in 2014 can partly explain this. The decision to admit that someone is a homosexual is affected by fear of the reaction of the rest of the community. In Roma communities, the family is the most important thing, partly because of discrimination from the majority society. The home is the only safe place. Except for LGBTQ people: they usually lose this safety as soon as they come out. They become stigmatised in their own family.

Can you give me an example for this?

There is a shocking and interesting story of a transgender man who participated in my survey. The person underwent surgery and is now male. After the operation, his family said that their son had become really healthy because SHE wasn't a lesbian anymore, now HE is straight. It shows clearly the confusion and misunderstanding around this issue.

In your research you tried to find out whether there are any improvements between the Roma community and LGBTQ people in the Czech Republic. What did you find?

I interviewed several LGBTQ people. It seems that being gay is a very shameful thing in most Roma families. To come out is always difficult, but in Roma communities people often face excommunication from the family or even from the whole community. But there is a difference between generations: young Roma do not primarily perceive homosexuality as a problem anymore. Also, the situation and positive approach to homosexuality in the Czech Republic has been a huge help for Roma as well.

Are there any interesting characteristics of Roma LGBTQ people?

I think the education of the Roma-LGBTQ minority is quite interesting. Although Roma in the Czech Republic usually attend Roma-only schools or classes and so gain worse education than people belonging to the majority society, the number of educated individuals among LGBTQ Roma is enormously high. We can assume that among homosexual Roma the education level is higher than among heterosexual Roma. If Roma society keeps on discriminating against its own LGBTQ community and punishing homosexuals for being homosexuals, they cannot expect these educated members of their society to deal with the Roma question and therefore help to improve the way the

Roma minority is perceived by the majority society. The situation is changing: today we don't only have young, but also elderly Roma homosexuals in our organisation, who are really active and willing to change our society, especially the Roma community.

Do you think that something else may have changed in the past few years concerning Roma LGBTQ communities generally in Europe. Do you regard Roma as more active now?

In my opinion we will be even more active and more visible in the future. Recently, we organised a conference on Roma LGBTQ issues this year in Prague. 28 Roma people coming from 12 different countries attended the conference. Slowly, Roma communities have started to consider the LGBTQ issue more seriously. People in the Czech Republic still believe that you only find gay or lesbian people among the majority society. We want to make people aware of the fact that there is an LGBTQ scene in our community as well.

Of course the whole society must improve the rights of gay people: the huge LGBTQ scene needs support.

What do you think about the future of LGBTQ Roma? When will it be easier to be Roma and gay at the same time?

Well, I think we're visible now but it will take some decades to achieve real and relevant change. The reason is that it's

a really personal and challenging topic so it will need some time. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that Roma LGBTQ rights in general will improve in countries like the Czech Republic or Hungary.

Do you believe that young LGBTQ people can change the restricted view of their parents and the elderly?

Yes, take me as an example. I'm accepted by my family and my family is accepted as well. Therefore other families will be accepted too. I mean, parents will love you, whether you are gay or not. If people have personal experience and get in touch with this topic, they accept it. Parents who are 'affected' should enter into a common dialogue with each other. So my mother talked with other families and made them aware of the situation and she explained how it is to have a gay son.

You've mentioned that one of your goals is to specify intersex discrimination and Roma LGBTQ discrimination in national laws of countries. Do you think that you can achieve more through a legal struggle or by building up a movement and giving information to the communities?

I think both have to work. First of all, we need a European Roma LGBTQ platform which we have already established at the first Roma LGBTQ conference. We are in the European Union, so if EU organisations start to change their attitudes towards LGBTQ people, our national governments might change too.