UNCC300 CASE STUDY 1:
HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE ROMA PEOPLE IN ITALY

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years tensions have arisen in Italy and other parts of Europe over the presence of the Roma people, their perceived lifestyle and particularly the illegal camps that have sprung up on the outskirts of many cities, including Rome.

The Roma are a distinct ethnic and cultural group, with their origins in northern India, but they have lived in many parts of Europe for centuries and are often traditionally linked with Romania. This video (with full subtitles) and information from Open Society gives some background on who the Roma are and the challenges they face. Many Roma fled Romania when it was ruled by the brutal dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and, when Romania joined the European Union in 2007, many others travelled freely to other nations to escape the life of poverty and discrimination to which they were being subjected [transcript].

This movement of the Roma into Western Europe sparked fears of a ‘nomad invasion’ and rising crime rates which were used as tactics in the election campaign of 2008. The victorious, newly-elected Italian government led by Silvio Berlusconi, enacted special new laws to ‘protect the public order’. These laws allowed for the forcible eviction of the Roma and the destruction of the camps where they lived. Read Section 1 of this Amnesty International report for full details of the Nomad Emergency and the actions taken to counteract the perceived ‘invasion’. Right wing political groups in Italy, such as the Northern League, continue to incite anti-Roma feelings and have even suggested that the camps where Roma live need to be bulldozed.

In many European countries, the Roma are treated as outcasts and second class citizens, and Italy is not immune to this attitude towards the Roma. Whilst Italy has a sound assisted housing scheme for those on the margin, Amnesty International claims that the system discriminates against the Roma. That they are among the most disadvantaged groups in Italian society is indisputable, as the figures in this article show. This video (with full subtitles) from Amnesty International shows the reality of life for one Roma family.

Recently the Italian courts have acknowledged discrimination against the Roma people and made rulings about their rights.

Of significance in this investigation of attitudes and policies towards the Roma people are questions of the understanding of human dignity at play. Many in Europe consider all Roma as nomadic gypsies who make a living from a life of crime. As such, they have forfeited their right to be treated with dignity. Others would argue that they are simply people seeking a safe and secure environment in which to raise their families. Their aspirations are the same aspirations as other members of society, a home, a job, an opportunity for education; in short, to live a life of dignity like other people.

These questions and others are discussed in the perspectives and readings below. As you read the perspectives and articles below, consider which understandings of human dignity are operative in each argument, and what shortcomings such understandings may have in light of a multidimensional understanding of the human person.
THREE MAIN PERSPECTIVES

Many perspectives could be identified in this issue. Here we have articulated only three. Which understandings of human dignity are operative in these arguments, and what shortcomings may such an understanding have in light of a multidimensional understanding of the human person?

Perspective 1: The widespread discrimination and marginalisation of the Roma people, together with policies to forcibly evict them from their ‘camps’, is a violation of their inherent dignity. The Roma are human beings, like all other people, who seek only to live a life of dignity and to provide for their families.

Perspective 2: Public perceptions of the Roma and the public discourse about them are influenced by negative stereotypes often summarised in the language used of them. This negative stereotyping strips the Roma of their dignity and allows for the formation of public policy which is exclusionary and marginalising.

Perspective 3: Public policy relating to the Roma people undermines their dignity in so far as it does not focus on building capacity and autonomy on either an individual or communal level. Such policies limit opportunities for the Roma to reach their full potential as human persons.

As you read the articles in the links below, analyse the understanding of human dignity that underpins the arguments and consider how this understanding of human dignity is being brought to bear on the question of the Roma people and their treatment. Note that you may find two authors of different ethical positions explaining dignity in a similar way or in more than one way such that it could fit into the same quadrant as another author or into several quadrants. Look carefully for the nuances and underlying assumptions that further qualify the understandings of human dignity such that the authors nonetheless arrive at different ethical positions.

In some of the articles provided, the authors also refer to other authors who offer perspectives on dignity different from their own in relation to the question of parole. You may wish to use the references in the articles provided to trace these additional perspectives.
REQUIRED READINGS

The first reading is a report from Amnesty International which outlines the so called ‘Nomad Plan’ of the Berlusconi Government highlighting the inherent abuse of human rights contained in this response. More importantly, it tells the story of three Roma families and their aspirations for themselves and their children.


The second reading examines the way that language used about the Roma influences public perceptions and discourse, and the ways in which this discourse influences government policy. The use of terms like ‘the gypsy problem’ says less about the Roma themselves than it does about the way the majority and its political representatives see and represent them.


The final paper suggests that there is an inherent paradox in government policy towards the Roma in Italy. While using the language of ‘inclusion’ into mainstream society, government at various levels actually enact policies, such as housing the Roma in ‘camps’, which in fact cause further exclusion and marginalisation.

ADDITIONAL READINGS AND RESOURCES

Here are some additional resources to assist you in your analysis of this issue.

