

## GIPSY WOMEN BECOMING AUTONOMOUS



*Gipsy women and girls have fewer life chances and very limited vocational horizons, given their low educational attainment, school absenteeism and early school drop-out. Another problem for Gipsies in Portugal is that their chances of finding seasonal employment in agriculture just across the border, in Spain, have diminished as a result of competition from third country nationals. "P'lo sonho é que vamos" is an EQUAL Development Partnership that attempts to address these two issues through an unusual combination of agencies.*

*"In Portugal, the Gipsy community and the non-Gipsy community are both marked by deep gender asymmetries" says Maria do Céu da Cunha Rêgo from the Directorate General for Consular Affairs of the Portuguese Foreign Ministry "they tend to exert a restraining influence on the roles that Gipsy women might play and on the opportunities that might otherwise be available to them." So whilst the DP decided to adopt a range of approaches to tackle the two main problems, it started by trying to find answers to the problem of reconciling work and family responsibilities. Its work is a reflection of the European Council's Recommendations (2004/741/EC) on the implementation of Member States' employment policies that propose that Portugal should strengthen its active labour market measures for the unemployed and the inactive and ensure their efficiency.*

*"All of us knew that we had to give up all thoughts of marriage and marriage is a very important institution in our culture", says Sónia Matos, "otherwise it would have been impossible to follow our beliefs and to make a better lives for ourselves and for other Gipsy women." Sónia is the Treasurer of Associação para o Desenvolvimento das Mulheres Ciganas Portuguesas (the Association for the Development of Portuguese Gipsy Women) or AMUCIP for short, which is the only association of its type in the whole of Portugal. Through its involvement with the Centro de Estudos para a Intervenção Social (Centre for Studies on Social Intervention) or CESIS and the Direcção Geral dos Assuntos Consulares e Comunidades Portuguesas (Directorate General for Consular Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), a unique DP has been created that is working with and not for Gipsy women.*

### **FOLLOWING OUR DREAM**

"Following our dream" is a rough translation of the title of this DP and, to turn the dream into reality, a series of very practical activities has been designed. The DP has two main locations for its operations. Its activities that relate to the role of Gipsy women are centred in the Municipality of Seixal that was a partner with the Directorate General for Consular Affairs in a previous EQUAL DP called [Migrações e Desenvolvimento](#) (Migration and Development) and where AMUCIP is based. The second set of actions is focused on the Municipalities of Beja and Serpa in Baixo Alentejo, one of the areas from which Gipsy families leave to work in Spain following the seasonal and different agricultural activities during the year.

### **FACILITATING ACCESS TO EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT**

In Seixal, the main activities are concerned with creating and testing new solutions to reconciling the working, personal and family lives of Gipsy women and men and to improving the educational perspectives for Gipsy children. AMUCIP provides social-educational support outside school hours and also helps in transporting children to and from school and in mediating between schools and families. In addition, it provides an open forum in which women can discuss problems or issues that affect their lives and it also celebrates Gipsy culture through its dance activities.



*The house that will provide a centre for the DP's reconciliation activities*

An old, but beautiful, house has been provided by the Municipality and thanks to this EQUAL project and the financial support of a bank, Fundação Montepio Geral, it has been renovated to provide a space for the development of the AMUCIP's activities and for the encounters and dialogue between the Gipsy and non-Gipsy communities. In effect, the DP believes that some 30 or 40 years ago there was an interdependency between these two communities that has been lost and it now wants to re-build a dialogue, based on citizenship, understanding, respect and trust that might eliminate reciprocal

stereotypes and lead to a re-evaluation of the contribution of the Gipsy community and of some of its more traditional skills. The house is also a physical symbol of status and success which might help both Gipsy and local men to reconsider their views about the role of women, as AMUCIP is seen as having been instrumental in creating this new facility and in intervening actively, as an equal partner, in community life. The DP is also working through AMUCIP to reinforce its capacity to identify new forms of training and employment that are adapted to the needs and interests of Gipsies. This includes the development of an initial course for the training of trainers addressed, in particular, to Gipsy women and training to empower AMUCIP to intervene positively in social and community issues.

In Seixal and also in Baixo Alentejo (Beja and Serpa), the other location, 72 workers will be trained in intercultural skills. Two, of Gipsy origin, will undertake a probationary period at the local hospital, working as facilitators between the health services and the Gipsy community. One of these facilitators will then be hired on a full-time basis. Also for the Gipsy community in this area, information is being provided on rights and duties and on labour issues when working abroad.

## **FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY**

The DP is also developing training activities for staff in central and local administrations and from other public and private agencies, such as municipalities, schools, social security offices and NGOs. A guide to good practices in different thematic areas, such as training, employment and reconciliation measures will also be produced. *"Here in Seixal, and in the areas of Beja and Serpa, there are some difficulties in the dialogue between the Gipsy and the non-Gipsy communities"* reports Ana Cardoso, the Project Coordinator, *"that is why we want to promote an intercultural dialogue and a deepening of the concept of citizenship."* To support such activities, "P'lo sonho é que vamos" will create transferable information



*The celebrations at the official opening of this new centre in Seixal*

materials adapted to the Gipsy communities to support the human development of Gipsy people and to disseminate reciprocal positive images of the Gipsy and non-Gipsy communities. Also, knowledge exchange think tanks or "Tertúlias" are being organised as a way of stimulating new thinking on these issues. The first of these *Tertúlias* took place recently in the AMUCIP office during a meeting of the DP's transnational partnership. Two Gipsy men from the [Spanish partner DP](#) led a debate on the role of women and men in the Gipsy communities in relation to access to education and employment and their contribution was mainly addressed to Portuguese Gipsy men.

## A PRACTICAL PARTNERSHIP

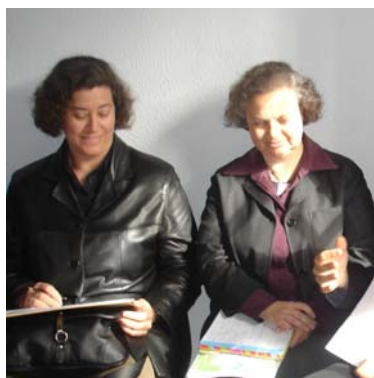
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The DP starts from a useful definition that was coined by Jordi Estivilli, in a publication "Partnership and Exclusion" published in 1993. He sees partnership as *"a process by which two or more agents, of a distinct nature, maintain their specific nature, but reach an agreement to do something, in a given time, which is bigger than the sum of their individual actions, or which they wouldn't be able to do by themselves"*.

### IDENTIFYING COMMON INTERESTS FOR JOINT ACTION

The original partners spent some time working on a common diagnosis or definition of the issues that needed to be tackled by the DP. In this phase, they also had as a partner the Institute of Educational Communities (ICE), which is a private, non-profit making organisation. The Institute was helpful in the definition of the central preoccupations of the DP and also in identifying the related "know-how" that existed within the DP or in other agencies.

One useful strategy that was identified early on was to use the concern of the Gipsy community for the welfare of its children, as a way of creating a bridge to more members of that community. So, the DP decided to place an emphasis on children's and women's health in its activities and two extra partners were invited to join. These were the Central Hospital in Baixo Alentejo and the Primary Health Care Centre in Seixal. Several *Tertúlias* concerning mother and child health care issues are being organised by these two health services, which are also offering specific training to their staff on working with members of the Gipsy community.



Ana Cardoso (right) discusses the DP's progress with her colleague Heloísa Perista

All of the partners and the DP staff meet regularly each month to discuss issues concerned with the content of the work and there is also a separate monthly meeting to deal with financial management. The methodology that "P'lo sonho é que vamos" has adopted includes meetings where the focus is on discussion and reflection on subjects such as Gipsy culture and also separate sessions on the EQUAL Initiative covering its principles and methods of operation. Ana Cardoso again, *"we try to understand each other and maybe we don't always go as fast as we would like, but we want to make sure that everyone has the same understanding."* The DP has decided on the planning instruments and methods that it should use and together the partners built a self-assessment tool and defined indicators for the monitoring and self-evaluation of their own work and of the activities of the DP as a whole. Monitoring and evaluation are carried out with guidance from CESIS, the DP's Managing Organisation. There is also a continuing debate on the most effective mechanisms for communication particularly as the DP started from a very poor situation in terms of access to phone, fax and e-mail.

### DEVELOPING MUTUAL TRUST BETWEEN VERY DIVERSE PARTNERS

The partnership is an interesting mixture containing, as it does, a respected, independent research organisation with knowledge of EU programmes, a central government department with existing experience in EQUAL, two health service providers used to handling finance and administration and a local group of Gipsy women that was established with some difficulty by a widow, Olga Mariano. As Olga explains *"we faced great problems and at the start there was opposition to our group from both the Gipsy and non-Gipsy communities. We had ideas like these four years ago and it's only now that we can really do something to help other Gipsy women!"* The other partners share Olga's view that this is a chance that should not be wasted and so the DP has been very careful to develop mutual trust and confidence. Some specific sessions have been devoted to partnership building and there is now openness and a recognition and respect for the views and contributions of all the partners. Whilst meetings



Olga Mariano - a widow with courage and conviction and the founder of AMUCIP

are informal, as this helps people feel at ease, they are geared to result in clear agreements about what should be done, about who should do it and about how it should be done. All partners now believe that there is a common commitment and a willingness to learn in the DP, which drive its innovation.

## TAKING THINGS FORWARD

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To help it further and sustain its objectives, the DP has established an “Accompanying Network” which it sees as a light form of support structure. It comprises ACIME (the Portuguese High Commission for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities), IEFP (the National Agency for Employment and Training), IOM (the International Organisation for Migration), the Portuguese Directorate General for Health, three Municipal Councils from areas in which the DP is working and finally Montepio Geral. [Montepio Geral](#) is a bank and also a foundation that has social aims including the promotion of gender equality. This bank was awarded with the “Equality is Quality” prize for public and private employers and NGOs that have a good record on gender equality policies and reconciliation issues.

This support network offers a source of constructive criticism in relation to its activities and outputs and this is particularly helpful to the DP’s staff. The network is engaged in assisting with the definition of strategies for sustainability and it also lends credibility to the project. The involvement of a bank that might be committed to exploring new lines of credit and new methods of providing grants is important to the DP both in terms of its credibility and its sustainability.

The DP is sharing its experience with other bodies and agencies. Though its transnational partnership [Sonho Romi Stelle](#), it is in contact with Round 1 and Round 2 EQUAL projects that work with Gipsy, Sinti and Roma people. It is also hoping to contribute to the creation of a European Network of such projects and the DP has plans to participate, in conjunction with a Finnish DP, in a first seminar of these projects, in June 2006. At national level, the DP is also an active member of the Portuguese [Thematic Network](#) on the Social and Vocational Integration of Immigrants, Refugees and Ethnic Minorities.

The two main aspects of its experience that the DP wishes to promote and sustain are:

- Reconciliation between work responsibilities and personal and family life;
- The intercultural dialogue between Gipsy and non-Gipsy communities from the perspective of citizenship.

It is currently working on how to position its outputs in relation to national policies, for example those priorities that are outlined in the Portuguese National Action Plans for Employment, for Gender Equality and for Inclusion. The partners want to enlarge the dimensions of current policy discussions but they have to take care that they don’t lose sight of the DP’s grass root practice, at least in relation to the first issue. As Olga puts it *“there is nobody better placed to change the every day realities of their women and their older daughters than members of the Gipsy community themselves!”*

### **The Three Most Important Lessons from P’lo sonho é que vamos**

1. *The DP has first hand knowledge of the sacrifices and separation that Gipsy woman experience when they actively work, on behalf of their peers, to promote equality of opportunity and a better reconciliation between family and working life.*
2. *The DP has found that using the concerns of Gipsy or Roma communities for the welfare of their children and focusing on the children’s health and education is an effective way of creating a bridge to other members of these communities.*
3. *Some years ago in Portugal, there was a high level of inter-dependency between the Gipsy and non-Gipsy communities, which has now been lost. The DP believes that this inter-dependency can be recreated through dialogue, based on citizenship, understanding and trust and that this will lead to a re-evaluation of the contribution of the Gipsy community and of some of its more traditional skills.*

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Link to [EQUAL database description](#)