

# **A Place at the Policy Table**

## **Report on the Roma Women's Forum**

**Budapest, Hungary**

**June 29, 2003**

**Recommendations on:**

**Education**

**Economic Empowerment**

**Sexual and Reproductive Rights**

**Grassroots Leadership and Political Participation**

**Network Women's Program**



**OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Few minority groups in Europe face as much social, economic, and political discrimination as do the Roma. The situation is even worse for Romani women, who also must deal with the sexism of the mainstream society and their own communities. There are encouraging signs, however, that local governments, nongovernmental organizations, international institutions, and the Romani community itself are taking steps to identify the most pressing problems affecting Romani women and developing strategies to improve their lives.

An important milestone in this process was the Roma Women's Forum held on June 29, 2003 in Budapest. Organized by the Open Society Institute's Network Women's Program, the forum brought together more than 100 Romani activists, donors, international human rights activists, and government representatives from Central and Eastern Europe—where most Roma currently live—as well as from Western Europe and the United States. The forum marked one of the first times that Romani women presented their own comprehensive policy agenda to high-level officials from regional governments and international agencies. Participants openly discussed long-ignored issues of great concern to Romani women, such as equal access to quality education for girls, forced sterilization, violence against women, early marriage, sexual taboos, access to health care, and Romani women's political participation. They also developed a set of recommendations for policymakers within the region and beyond.

The forum took place the day before a related two-day conference, "Roma in an Expanding Europe: Challenges for the Future." The conference, hosted by the Hungarian government and cosponsored by the World Bank, the Open Society Institute (OSI), and the European Commission, focused on the integration of the Roma into European society. It concluded with government representatives from Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, and Slovakia endorsing the "Decade of Roma Inclusion" initiative, which will provide a framework for governments, working in partnership with Romani citizens, to set goals for Roma integration.

Many of the key issues raised at the Roma Women's Forum were addressed during the conference, giving further impetus for governments to consider the specific concerns of Romani women when developing future policies. This achievement demonstrated the extent to which Romani women are taking charge of their own lives to help themselves, their families, and their communities. Romani women's advocates also were hopeful that the attendance of men—both Roma and non-Roma—at the forum and their apparent willingness to help women secure a place in the Romani community shows a newfound understanding and sensitivity to Romani women's issues.

"For the first time, Roma women were equal to Roma men," said Enisa Eminova, a 22-year-old Romani activist and technology consultant for OSI's Network Women's Program's (NWP) Roma Women's Initiative. "We were given our own room and space

to sit down and discuss our problems and what we struggle with, together with Roma men and other allies.”

## **Opening Session**

The Roma Women’s Forum’s opening session focused primarily on the unique disadvantages that Romani women face—both as women and members of a long-oppressed ethnic minority.

Nicoletta Bitu, a consultant to the Romani rights NGO Romani Criss in Romania, criticized the general tendency to view Romani women’s issues as Romani issues without examining the specific problems faced by Romani women. A similar point was raised by Azbija Memedova, another consultant to OSI’s Network Women’s Program and coordinator of the Roma Center of Skopje in Macedonia. Memedova challenged women’s groups and national and regional structures devoted to gender equity to integrate the concerns of Romani women into their work.

Speakers advocated using international human rights norms to overcome the double discrimination faced by Romani women. Dimitrina Petrova, executive director of the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), highlighted the strategic advantages of a human rights-based approach, noting that it is “the language of governments and [it] locks governments into legal obligations that provide effective levers for advocacy.” Efforts to mainstream gender into human rights movements and to develop rights-based advocacy in the international women’s movement also provide entry points for Romani women’s activism, Petrova suggested.

The Roma Women’s Forum held panels on education, economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive rights, and grassroots leadership and political participation. The panels and the forum’s closing session are summarized in the following sections.

## **Education**

Romani girls face unique disadvantages in education. Pressure to marry early, cultural obligations, and lack of female teachers as role models are among the root causes that prevent 35 percent of Romani girls in Macedonia from finishing primary school, noted Zaklina Durmis, president of Dendo Vas, the Organization for Youth and Children in Skopje. “Research has shown lack of attention from teachers affects girls more than boys—there is no difference between girls and boys in primary school, in fact, girls tend to do better until they encounter pressure to marry early,” said Refika Mustafic, executive director of the Roma Education Center in Serbia.

Segregation of Romani pupils into inferior schools whether all-Romani schools in the ghettos or schools for mentally handicapped children, is another obstacle preventing all Romani children, including girls, from going further in school. The teaching of Romani culture, history, and language and better monitoring of school systems were also

identified as ways to help create a less discriminatory learning environment for all students.

Maria Metodieva, an eRider technology consultant who supports educational desegregation projects through the Roma Information Project in Bulgaria, argued that education is a powerful catalyst for reducing poverty and inequality, as well as for building democratic societies and globally competitive economies. As an educated Romani woman in a nontraditional occupation, Metodieva has experienced disapproval in the patriarchal Roma society. But, she said, “the Roma women’s movement is taking on technology whether our men like it or not.” Metodieva proposed resolutions for closing the gender gap in education, including access to vocational and technological education for Romani girls.

### **Economic Empowerment**

Compared with their non-Romani counterparts, Romani women have lower life expectancy rates and educational levels and higher rates of fertility, mortality, unemployment, and poverty. They also suffer from poorer health and more extensive social exclusion and gender-based discrimination. All these factors combine to make the economic empowerment of Romani women particularly challenging.

Telling the story of one desperate 17-year old Romani woman from her community in Bulgaria, Silviya Filipova of the European Roma Pakiv Fund said, “Romani women should not have to sell their bodies and dignity to survive.” To address the controversial issue of prostitution within a socially conservative culture, Filipova called for better educational opportunities and income-generating programs for Romani women.

“Public funds should be spent to give Roma women entrepreneurs access to capital,” said Blanka Kosma of the Hungarian Association for Roma Women in Public Life. Kosma also suggested that employment assistance programs should create jobs that enable Romani women to contribute to their communities, for example, as social workers. One successful model program created by Romani Criss and funded by the Romanian government trained Romani women to work as health mediators to help Romani communities gain access to services from the Romanian health care system.

Maria Nowak, president of Association pour le Droit à l’Initiative Économique (ADIE), discussed the challenges involved in balancing economic empowerment with Romani women’s traditional roles as wives and mothers. Based on her success in developing income-generating programs for Romani women in France, she said that “supporting income-generating activities with self-employment is a good way to promote economic empowerment for Roma women and break the cycle of poverty within the Roma community.” She added that successful policies must also be realistic in their attempts to achieve harmony between economic empowerment and tradition and culture.

## **Sexual and Reproductive Rights**

In addition to the lack of access to basic health care, Romani women struggle against coerced sterilization, sexual taboos, arranged marriages, and domestic violence.

Mária Vamosiné Pálmai, who dropped out of school at age 14 to get married, painted a bleak portrait of the current status of most young Romani women. “Romani girls are deprived of the right to decide about their own lives. They are often made to leave school as they start to mature in order to secure their virginity for marriage. They don’t follow their dreams. They don’t care about their health. There are no options for them.”

Pálmai, however, has taken bold steps to help others like her. At 23, Pálmai, the mother of three, founded ARANJ, one of the first Romani women’s organizations established by Romani women living in traditional communities. ARANJ has conducted research and organized public discussions about sexual taboos and the cult of virginity in Romani communities. The research/ public education project, based on a model developed by Enisa Eminova and 12 other young Romani women in Macedonia, resulted in the report *On Virginity*. Pálmai said that young Romani women in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia will soon be initiating similar projects supported by OSI’s Network Women’s Program.

Anna Karamanou, the chairperson of the European Parliament’s Committee on Women’s Rights and Equal Opportunities, noted that the European Union (EU) enlargement process has created special opportunities to improve the situation of Romani communities and Romani women in EU accession countries. She urged Romani women to press the EU to protect Romani women’s reproductive and sexual rights and to provide equal opportunities for their communities.

## **Grassroots Leadership and Political Participation**

Few Romani women currently hold leadership positions in the region’s political systems or NGO culture. As a result, said Slavica Vasic, president of the Romani women’s organization Bibija, “Roma women’s human rights are not emphasized.” Bibija has attempted to rectify that situation by seeking to involve Romani women in public policy debates and to increase Romani women’s political participation in Serbia.

Nicholae Gheorge, of the Roma/Sinti Contact Point for the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE), noted that there is not one Romani woman in the region’s parliaments, though there are a few Romani women in appointed government positions. One of the forum’s policy recommendations calls for the appointment of national advisors on minority women’s issues in Central and Eastern European governments.

Mona Sahlin, Sweden’s Minister for Democracy and Integration, concluded the panel with a call for Romani women’s leadership and solidarity among all women:

Women have been seen as less important for a long time. We have been made invisible. But women from minority groups have carried a double burden in many ways. And women in politics, especially Roma women, are challenging a lot of opinions. It is controversial. To use politics, you must organize, you must unite, you must dare and be very, very strong. To change Roma women's lives you have to change laws, fight discrimination, change prejudice and mainstream Roma issues. Politics is the only way to do all this. It's about organizing, starting networks and helping each other. We must start acting like sisters. If one Roma woman is sterilized, my freedom is threatened. Women in the majority must show more solidarity. Roma rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights.

### **Closing Session**

In the forum's closing session, Elaine Wolfensohn of the World Bank recommended that policymakers and advocates examine Romani history to understand the current situation for Roma in Europe. Praising the leadership of Romani women, she said that development research has shown that "every society works better when there is gender equity."

OSI President Aryeh Neier declared the forum a significant event that will be seen as the start of a process "to propel us forward with Roma women's issues high on the list." Neier added that "Roma women should lead the struggle to promote the rights of Roma women."

Debra Schultz, director of programs for OSI's Network Women's Program, also emphasized that Romani women themselves are the most important resource in the ongoing fight for equality. "Roma women will lead the way to deep and lasting transformations in European society by challenging racism, sexism, poverty, and exclusion simultaneously," she said. "They have a clear-eyed view of problems at the local level, where the impact of change must be felt."

### **Women and the "Decade of Roma Inclusion"**

In addition to their work in the Roma Women's Forum, Romani women activists played a crucial role at the larger "Roma in an Expanding Europe: Challenges for the Future" conference. Partly at their instigation, a number of conference panels addressed policy issues affecting Romani women, including education, employment, social assistance measures, community development programs, and local services.

To ensure that Romani women's issues are integrated into "The Decade of Roma Inclusion," Nicoletta Bitu presented a summary of the Roma Women's Forum agenda to the prime ministers of Bulgaria, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, and

Slovakia, as well as to high-ranking ministers from Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Serbia.

Her presentation included these remarks:

The Roma women's agenda highlights the fact that gender equality is far from being achieved in either majority or Roma communities. There is a strong concern regarding the lack of pertinent solutions addressing the situation of Roma women and children. Roma women activists do not want to create a separate movement of Roma women but rather seek to mainstream Roma women's issues into all levels and structures for both women and Roma.

The participants of the forum...expressed a desire to preserve both Romani language and cultural values, but not at the expense of respecting freedom of choice for each individual, including Romani women.



## **A ROMA WOMEN'S AGENDA**

Participants at the Roma Women's Forum developed the following principles and recommendations for a Roma Women's Agenda to be incorporated into all working plans for the Decade of Roma Inclusion.

### **General Principles**

- Roma women's issues represent a challenge for both women's and Roma movement discourses. Roma women's agendas call into question the assumed universality of human rights discourse for those involved in defending human rights for both women and Roma.
- Recognizing the steps taken by the governments for improving the situation of Roma and women, the Roma Women's Agenda highlights the fact that gender equality is far from being achieved in both majority and Romani communities.
- Romani women activists do not want to create a separate movement of Romani women but rather seek to mainstream Roma women's issues into all levels and structures for both women and Roma.
- The democratization process in our countries has promised first of all freedom of choice by the individual. We want to express our concern regarding the limitation of this freedom by various cultural practices (not only in the case of Roma).
- The situation of Romani women, like the situation of the Romani community as a whole, is deteriorating. Poverty hinders the ability of Roma women to improve conditions and opportunities for themselves, their families, and communities.
- Long-term, systemic solutions require the participation of Roma women at all levels of politics and policymaking, including the highest levels.
- The participants of the Roma Women's Forum call on policymakers to provide effective monitoring mechanisms to ensure implementation of the recommendations below.

### **General Recommendations**

#### **Governments should:**

- Involve Romani women in development policies and programs on behalf of Roma.
- Support freedom of choice for Romani women and girls despite appeals to "tradition" seeking to limit their full human rights. State policies should address cultural practices if a community's traditions violate basic human

rights. Best practices from developing countries should be investigated by policymakers and NGOs in the region monitoring these policies for their relevance to Roma women's rights.

- Create national action plans for Roma development in every country that explicitly include recommendations for improving the lives of Romani women and mainstreaming Roma women's issues in all relevant national programs.
- Mainstream Roma women's issues into national machineries' agendas on women and on Roma issues and appoint a minority gender advisor.
- Fund and support high quality, participatory research that produces gender disaggregated data with appropriate anonymity and/or legal safeguards to protect privacy and laws regarding ethnic data collection. Research that accurately maps the situation of Romani women in each country is of prime importance identifying the real priorities of Romani women; building Romani women's networks; and helping donors and policymakers support effective interventions. Data protection regulations prohibit the collection of ethnic data, usually for legitimate reasons. In these countries, proxy indicators should be found with the help of academic communities and knowledgeable NGOs.
- Train ombudsmen or equal opportunity commissioners to respond appropriately to anti-bias and gender-related complaints. Governments and civil society should challenge ombudsmen's performances if they do not address gender-related complaints.
- Create mechanisms to monitor two political criteria for EU Accession—minority rights and gender equity—to make sure that they address Romani women's concerns.
- Create policies that explicitly address the needs of Romani women and children refugees and internally displaced persons, in accordance with international law and practice on women in post-conflict situations (such as UN Resolution 1325, which requires the involvement of women in peace-building and reconstruction).

**Civil society organizations should:**

- Raise awareness of violations of Romani women's human rights, taking into account multiple discrimination on the basis of gender, poverty, and ethnicity/race.
- Integrate Roma women's issues into the Roma movement; women's rights movement; and the agendas of governments and international institutions.
- Mainstream Roma women's issues in all programs implemented by governments, donors, women's NGOs, and international institutions, promoting the participation of Romani women from the program design stage onward.

- Take into account not only Romani women's multiple roles as mothers, professionals, and activists when designing programs for Romani women, but also the fact that many of them have recently entered professional life from traditional families and communities.

**The United Nations should:**

- Put pressure on member states to respect UN conventions related to women's rights and fulfill their obligations (timely reporting, etc.) with emphasis on minority and Romani women.
- Adopt conventions or protocols to existing conventions that protect minority and Romani women's rights.
- Organize a conference that would aim to promote the issue of minority and Romani women's rights, and increase the political level on which this issue is treated.

**Donors should:**

- Review and ensure that supported programs for Romani women do not parallel or duplicate activities, as this practice does not improve the situation but only serves to build competition among Romani women and undermine the creation of a more serious Roma women's movement.
- Support only programs that are initiated from and by Roma women organizations and activists.
- Build a direct relationship with local or national Roma women associations whenever possible.
- Support leadership training and human rights activities.

**Education Recommendations**

**Governments should:**

- Incorporate Romani women's perspectives into textbooks.
- Create community-based literacy programs for Romani women (which tend to improve the literacy levels of entire communities).
- Scale-up the training of significant numbers of Romani women as teaching assistants.
- Create scholarships programs for Romani women who left school early to have families and who wish to return to school (providing funds for childcare).

**Civil society organizations should:**

- Raise awareness among Romani families about the value of educating girls.

**Economic Empowerment Recommendations****Governments should:**

- Utilize Romani women's expertise for the benefit of the Romani community, linking unemployment benefits to community service rather than menial jobs.
- Create micro-enterprise programs for women that teach highly remunerative skills like computer skills, rather than those that reinforce racial, class, and gender stereotypes.
- Develop and support programs that provide employment opportunities for particularly vulnerable Romani women's groups, such as single mothers, mothers with husbands in prison, and victims of domestic violence.
- Create policy guidelines for vocational education of Romani girls that combat gender discrimination and provide equitable employment opportunities and treatment.

**Health and Sexuality Recommendations****Governments should:**

- Oppose and prevent the coercive provision or the denial of health services to Romani women (such as sterilization, abortion, birth control) as an instrument of racism or state population policy.
- Ensure funding for community-organized training and education efforts for parents and men specifically about the importance of education and the harmful effects of the virginity cult, arranged marriages, early marriage, and sexual taboos through community-based education campaigns.
- Institute sex education as part of the formal education system, including teacher training and parental education/involvement.
- Ensure that health care services for Romani women are available and accessible through support in obtaining identity documents, elimination of discriminatory eligibility criteria, mobile health services, training for physicians, the use of Romani health mediators, and establishing accountability and monitoring systems.
- Introduce training for those reforming health care policy on the following issues: access to client files and antidiscrimination issues involving Roma traditions, Roma issues, and women's equality.

**Civil society organizations should:**

- Prevent domestic violence through research on the specific dynamics of Romani families, which will inform such interventions as public awareness campaigns, sophisticated use of Roma media, education of women and men through community centers and leadership, national legislation, and monitoring.

**Grassroots Leadership and Political Participation Recommendations**

**Governments should:**

- Recruit Romani women in faculties of public administration and public policy by providing full scholarships, mentoring, and support networks.
- Educate and recruit Romani women public servants in a wide range of fields.
- Broaden Romani women's political leadership beyond the local level by creating multi-stage training and mentoring programs.
- Set targets for the involvement of Romani women in all branches of government at local, national and regional levels. To oblige municipal governments above a certain size and regional governments to elaborate their own plans for inclusive policy making processes on Roma issues.

For more information on the Roma Women's Agenda, contact: Azbija Memedova, coordinator, Roma Women's Initiative, [centar@mt.net.mk](mailto:centar@mt.net.mk)

## **PANEL PRESENTATIONS**

### **Excerpts from the Roma Women's Forum**

#### **Roma Women Building Alliances for Education**

##### *Panelists*

**Zaklina Durmis**, president of Dendo Vas, the Organization for Youth and Children, in Skopje, Macedonia.

**Kalinka Vasileva**, executive director of the Equal Access Foundation in Bulgaria.

**Maria Metodieva**, eRider consultant with the Roma Information Project in Bulgaria

##### *Respondent*

**Annette Dixon**, director of Regional Operations in Europe and Central Asia at the World Bank, where she is responsible for regional activities in Education, Health, and Social Protection.

##### **Zaklina Durmis**

“Despite the small percentage of Roma girls graduating from secondary school, there is evidence that with the proper support, they can do well in school.”

I am a Roma woman from the Republic of Macedonia. As a lawyer and humanist, I am devoted to fighting for the human rights of Roma, especially Roma women and children. As president of the Roma NGO Dendo Vas, I have directed projects supporting the education of Roma children and youth in the G. Petrov municipality of Skopje where over 1,500 Roma live.

According to the Constitution of Macedonia (Article 44/1/2), elementary school education is the right and obligation of every child in our country. Unfortunately, most Roma children are unable to attain a full elementary education because of poverty and the fact that most of their parents are uneducated or have only a primary school education. Poverty directly leads to low rates of school attendance because the children cannot afford school books and lack comfortable conditions at home for learning (most families live in one or two rooms). The low level of their parent's education creates an obstacle as well because children lack support from their parents about the value of school.

For example, in the municipality of Suto Orizari, the population of which is 90 percent Roma, making it the biggest Roma community in Macedonia, there are two elementary schools mainly comprised of Roma pupils. Ninety percent of Roma children enroll in the first grade in Suto Orizari, but only about half remain by the fifth grade.

The situation for girls is even worse, and the effects of poor education on the lives of Roma women and children are considerable. In the lower grades in Suto Orizari, there is no school attendance difference between female and male children. However, in the higher grades of

primary school, the increased absence of female pupils is noticeable. Because of Roma ethnic customs, girls are obligated to help in the house and to get married at very young ages (from 12 to 17 years old), and so are compelled to leave the school system early, mostly around the fourth grade.

Less than 36 percent of Roma children in Suto Orizari attend secondary school. Of these, only 13.3 percent are female.<sup>1</sup> In Macedonia, 97 percent of Roma women do not have regular jobs. Those who did not complete elementary school are not eligible for basic state-sponsored health insurance, nor can they register at the Employment Bureau. Many studies have shown a strong positive relationship between a mother's educational achievement and her child's birth weight, health, nutritional status, and educational achievement.<sup>2</sup> These facts suggest that states should support programs for Roma women's literacy and education, which are vital to their children's and their own well-being and future.

An improved classroom environment is critical for the success of Roma education. Preschool education that includes preparation in the majority language is also vital to the success of Roma children. There should be ongoing tutoring and educational support for Roma students at all levels of education. Yet even with such changes, discrimination by majority children, teachers, and communities poses major obstacles. The poverty suffered by Roma students and the lack of supportive learning conditions at home and at school negatively influence their status in the classroom among other pupils and often among teachers, too. Roma pupils often sit at the back of the classroom or are separated into a small group in the classroom. The teacher usually does not pay equal attention to them or help them progress in their learning. Research has shown that lack of attention by teachers generally affects girls more than boys.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the small percentage of Roma girls graduating from secondary school, there is evidence that with the proper support, they can do well in school. First, as previously mentioned, there is no difference in attendance rates between boys and girls in the first grade of primary school. In fact, girls are usually more successful in primary school than boys. By the later primary grades, however, girls start to be affected by family and cultural beliefs that a young marriage is the best option for their future. In order for girls to attain adequate education, they and their families must learn to seek alternative paths. Research shows that if parents do not expect girls to perform well in school, they usually do poorly.<sup>4</sup>

Research also suggests that parental involvement and recruiting young female teachers has been key to attracting and keeping female students in school.<sup>5</sup> Some programs, such as the Open Society Institute's Step by Step Special Schools Initiative, encourage the training of Roma women teaching assistants. This strategy benefits the students, the

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and The World Bank, *Vulnerability of Roma Children in the Municipality of Suto Orizari*, 69 (2000).

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank, *Engendering Development*, 84.

<sup>3</sup> The World Bank, *Engendering Development*, and Open Society Institute (OSI), *Open Minds: Opportunities for Gender Equity in Education*.

<sup>4</sup> The World Bank, *Engendering Development*, 171.

<sup>5</sup> The World Bank, *Engendering Development*, 171.

women themselves, and the entire community because it helps place positive role models in the classroom and provides paid skilled work for Roma women.

In addition to having positive female role models in the classroom, Roma children must see positive images of Roma women in their curricula and textbooks. Many educational reformers recommend the inclusion of Roma culture and language in the curriculum for all children in order to reduce bias, but it is unlikely that a positive image of Roma women as bearers of tradition and culture is being promoted in classrooms today. This needs to change in favor of new “Roma-sensitive” curricula. Furthermore, teacher training should promote antibias values, including gender equity in the classroom. There are many model programs of innovative teaching techniques that break down barriers between boys and girls, and children of different backgrounds.

### **Kalinka Vasileva**

“What are the life options available to a Romani girl who has grown up in the Romani ghetto and gone to school there? Can she dream of being a university student, a businesswoman, or a politician?”

The Equal Access Foundation promotes educational desegregation of Roma children in Bulgaria. As a result of Romani nongovernmental initiatives, more than 1,600 Roma children from segregated neighborhoods in my country now study in mainstream schools where they gain knowledge, explore the world, and socialize with Roma and non-Roma peers alike on an equal basis. Our aim is to have this positive model transformed into governmental policy.

I would like to draw your attention to the barriers confronting Romani girls in education. While exclusion from education is a problem faced by most of the Roma today, various surveys indicate that Romani girls are particularly at risk for not completing even the compulsory stages of their education. According to data provided in the 2002 UNDP regional report on Roma, in Romania 35 percent of the Romani girls do not finish primary school as compared to 27 percent of Romani boys. A 2001 research study by the Open Society Foundation in Bulgaria indicated that Romani girls tend to leave school in the fifth and sixth grade, while Romani boys remain for one or two more years. Secondary school and university-level education appear to be out of reach for many Romani girls and Romani women as well. A 1993 research study in Romania revealed that only 29.2 percent of Romani girls complete secondary education.

Low rates of school attendance and high rates of early dropout among Roma, especially Romani girls, tend to be attributed to certain Romani traditional customs. Most frequently, the dropout rate for Romani girls is explained by pressure from the Romani community to marry early. Early marriage and teenage pregnancy are undoubtedly barriers to Romani women’s education.



However, policymakers should go beyond the obvious and analyze the root causes for the exclusion from education of majority of Roma. One of the root causes is the segregation of Roma into inferior schools, whether all-Romani schools in the ghettos or schools for mentally handicapped children. Another cause is low expectations for Romani girls and boys in the segregated schools, which results in a lack of motivation for the children and their parents to have high aspirations for their lives. Separated from the majority children and neglected by their teachers, Romani children grow up with the stigma of inferiority.

For many Roma, schooling in all-Romani segregated schools closes the circle of life in the ghetto. What are the life options available to a Romani girl who has grown up in the Romani ghetto and gone to school there? Can she dream of being a university student, a businesswoman, or a politician? Maybe a few Romani girls can, but most will not have such dreams. A Romani girl who lives in the ghetto, like her parents and her grandparents before her, knows no other life. Everyday she meets people who did not go to school or did not finish and people who are unemployed or perform unskilled jobs.

The Romani communities in all of our countries have existed for the past several decades in isolation and separation from mainstream societies. This separation has not been the choice of the Roma; it has been forced upon us by the macro-society that has rejected us in a number of ways. Living and going to school in a segregated environment has had the effect of severely limiting the aspirations of several generations of Roma. The culture in this segregated environment is not the Romani culture; it is the culture of the ghetto.

The integration of Roma into mainstream society must begin with desegregation of education. Romani girls who start school together with non-Romani girls and boys will have a new vision for their lives because they will have a new social experience. They will discover that they can become doctors, lawyers, professors, etc. Parents will also start to realize their child's potential when they see them as equals to non-Romani children.

I recently had the chance to talk with Romani girls in Bulgaria who for the past three years have been attending schools that participate in the desegregation programs run by Romani nongovernmental organizations. These 15- and 16-year-old girls talked to me about their plans for the future: what careers they hoped for, what studies they wanted to pursue, and what they would like to achieve in their lives. Such conversations are extremely rare among Roma girls of segregated schools.

Desegregation of education is the way out of the vicious circle that reproduces the ghetto culture. When Romani children, both girls and boys, go to school together with non-Roma, a whole new horizon will open for them and their aspirations will soar. In order for desegregation to achieve irreversible integration of Roma into society, governments and multinational agencies will have to embrace desegregation as a policy and implement it on a national level.

## **Maria Metodieva**

“The emancipation of our community will not occur simply by helping Roma women become better daughters, wives, and mothers. We need to enable them to become better people who contribute to the betterment of our society.”

Through my work as an eRider consultant in the Roma community, I have realized how powerful an instrument education can be for reducing poverty and inequality. Education is also essential for improving health and social well-being, laying the basis for sustained economic growth, and building democratic societies and dynamic, globally competitive economies.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Unfortunately, we have become silent about some things that matter. And education for Roma matters, including Roma women and girls.

Education is defined as a basic human right by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and this right is being denied to a large portion of the Roma community. In Bulgaria, only 6 percent of Roma complete secondary education, in comparison to 40 percent of the total population. The number of Roma who complete university education is miniscule—only three individuals sampled in a 1997 survey had completed university in Bulgaria.

However, the World Bank study, “Poverty and Ethnicity: A Cross-Country Study of Roma Poverty in Central Europe,” which includes data on Roma educational attainment by gender, shows that women in Bulgaria and Romania are more likely to have achieved higher levels of education than men. The authors of the study suggest that this may be the case because boys are tracked more frequently into technical and vocational training.

I belong to a small group of Roma women who have had both the opportunity to attain a graduate degree and to work in the nontraditional field of technology. Seven years ago, at the age of 17, I had my first encounter with the Microsoft Windows operating system. Before this I had only worked in DOS. I had just graduated from high school and was beginning my career with a well-established Roma human rights organization based in Sofia, Bulgaria. The boss, a man, handed me some books on the operating system and set me to work. Soon I was up and running. From that point forward, I rose through the ranks of the organization.

When our organization got an Internet connection, the boss once again called on me. I was the only staff member who spoke English, and for me the World Wide Web was an easily deciphered mystery. A new world opened up for me and our organization. As my skills improved, the boss began to rely on me more and more to help him communicate via e-mail with donors, supporters, and other activists. My boss asked me to train several

other staff members on computers and Internet use. But several of the young men in the organization were resentful. Who was this woman to teach them? They would rather continue typing with one finger and struggling to produce documents than be taught by a woman.

Working with the women at the organization wasn't much easier. Many of them were accustomed to being taught by men, and were distrustful of a woman teaching them. They were reluctant to reveal they didn't know how to use the computer. Their competitiveness and fearfulness kept them from really learning from me, and I was unable to break through their resistance.

This kind of resistance and pressure, especially from the men in our community, is commonplace, and has resulted in few Roma women knowing how to use computers and even fewer using e-mail. Luckily, the younger generation, men and women like me and my other eRider colleagues, are breaking down these walls.

The emancipation of our community will not occur simply by helping Roma women become better daughters, wives, and mothers. We need to enable them to become better people who contribute to the betterment of our society. This will happen by supporting one another, communicating, collaborating, and sharing experiences. Information technology tools are perfect for enabling this collaboration. Through the work of our eRider team and other dedicated activists, the Roma women's movement is taking on technology whether our men like it or not.

## **Access to Economic Opportunities**

### ***Panelists***

**Jennifer Tanaka**, assistant director at the Pakiv European Roma Fund in Budapest.

**Silviya Filipova**, community developer at the Pakiv European Roma Fund.

**Nicoleta Bitu** has been affiliated with Romani CRISS (Romania) since its founding in 1993. On behalf of Romani Criss, she serves as coordinator for the ODIHR/OSCE project on "Roma and the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe," financed by the European Commission.

### ***Respondent***

**Maria Nowak**, president of Association pour le Droit à l'Initiative Économique (ADIE), France.

### **Jennifer Tanaka**

“We cannot expect to attack poverty effectively and empower women economically if these women are suffering from poor health, inadequate schooling and skills, social exclusion, and gender-based discrimination.”

The Roma in Central and Eastern Europe are the largest minority in the region, and the most disadvantaged. On international development rating scales, Central and Eastern European countries generally rate on the lower end among “developed” countries, though the actual everyday situation for Roma is not represented in these figures. For example, the recently published UNDP Regional Report estimates that the situation for Roma in Romania in terms of the Human Development Index places them in between countries like Zimbabwe and Swaziland.<sup>6</sup>

Roma have lower educational attainment levels, higher rates of unemployment, lower life expectancy rates, and higher infant mortality rates than the non-Roma population. The few gender-sensitive studies of Roma that have been done indicate that Romani women tend to have even lower educational attainment levels and higher rates of unemployment than their male counterparts.

In discussions on the economic empowerment of women, it is important to mention these facts, because what we are dealing with is poverty, which has many dimensions and is not only income-based. As the *UN State of the World Population Report 2002* said: “Economic growth will not by itself end poverty. . . . Escaping poverty depends on improving personal capacities and increasing access to a variety of resources, institutions and support mechanisms.”<sup>7</sup>

We cannot expect to attack poverty effectively and empower women economically if these women are suffering from poor health, inadequate schooling and skills, social exclusion, and gender-based discrimination.

In addition, for some 15 years since the start of the economic transition in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union, Romani women, along with their male counterparts, have been experiencing a deep sense of everyday insecurity. A new generation has come of age in a time when their parents have been frustrated trying to make ends meet, unable to provide for their children, and gradually being taken over by attitudes of defeat, apathy, vulnerability and lack of self-dignity.

While the development of the NGO sector and the introduction of governmental policies aimed at improving the situation for Roma have led to some positive experiences and useful models in the region, there have not been any programs aimed specifically at the economic empowerment of Romani women in the region. For the most part Romani women have remained invisible in the economic sphere.

I would like to stress the need to develop and support programs that provide employment opportunities to particularly vulnerable groups of Romani women. This includes single mothers, mothers with husbands in prison, and victims of domestic violence. Indeed, the

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Avoiding the Dependency Trap: A Regional Human Development Report*, 17 (2002).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), “People, Poverty and Possibilities,” *State of World Population Report* (2002).

numbers of unmarried mothers, divorced women, and comparatively young widows who bring up their children alone has been increasing over the last decade. Such programs should take into consideration low educational and skills levels among Romani women, early marriages and childbirth, and limited access to information and services, especially in segregated Romani communities. In the spirit of human rights and human dignity, Romani NGOs and women's groups should be encouraged to break the silence on domestic violence against Romani women, and identify concrete ways to empower economically-dependent victims.

There is also a need to support the production of community-based models of Romani women's initiatives aimed at creating new income and employment opportunities. The models should be able to inform possible governmental policies while producing broad-reaching outcomes whenever possible.

The health mediators program in Romania serves as one example of a pilot initiative that became state policy. In response to the health problems confronting Romani families and especially women, the Romani organization CRISS started a vocational training program to teach Romani women how to serve as health mediators in their communities. The roles of the mediators include mobilizing mothers to vaccinate their children, informing pregnant Romani women about and accompanying them to medical services, and assisting local Roma in obtaining access to local health services. As part of the government's efforts to improve the situation for Roma, the Romanian Ministry of Health now pays for the training and salaries of more than 160 health mediators, each of whom serves between 500 and 750 mothers and children.

Taking the success of the health mediators program as a model, governments and international organizations should work together to identify more ways of increasing the state's capacity to provide work opportunities that will improve the situation for Roma. This may include efforts for educating and recruiting Romani women to be public servants in a wide range of fields. It may also include linking unemployment benefits to community service rather than menial jobs such as street cleaning.

It is important to consider that *Avoiding the Dependency Trap*, the regional report on Roma recently published by UNDP, points out the ineffectiveness of Active Labor Market Policies toward Roma in many CEE countries. For the most part, training and retraining programs have not led to significant improvements in the employability of Roma. In many cases, this is due to the programs' failure to respond to market needs, and continued discrimination against Roma by employers.

However, there are successful models. A project sponsored by the Pakiv European Roma Fund coupled vocational training with job mediation. As an incentive, graduates of the course are exempted from income tax deductions from their wages for the first six months of employment. Recently, the Bulgarian government adopted a measure to subsidize employers who hire long-term unemployed individuals. Such initiatives should be promoted throughout the region for their many positive effects.

## **Silviya Filipova**

“There is a need to invest in today’s Romani youth, since the majority is at risk of falling into the same trap as their parents.”

The specific issue that I want to draw attention to is prostitution among Romani women in Pazardjik. One of the causes of this problem is the geographic location of the town. Situated between the capital Sofia and Plovdiv, the country’s second biggest city, Pazardjik has a large amount of traffic going through it, making it a good place for this kind of work.

In Romani culture, a woman should be a virgin before marriage and a trusted wife. If she does not obey these traditions, she will become an outsider to Roma society, and will bring shame to the Roma family. Even though these women know this, they take the risk of entering into prostitution because of the extreme poverty, misery, and hunger they face with their families and children.

Having spoken with some of the Roma prostitutes from my town, I would like to share with you the story of M.G. a 17 year old who is already world-weary. She has seen and come to understand a lot of things about being a woman in Roma society today. When M.G. was six years old, her parents divorced. She, her two brothers, and her mother lived in her grandparents’ one-room house in a small village near Pazardjik. She does not have any formal education, because living in such poverty meant that education was out of reach. At the age of 10, M.G. started to do agricultural work with her mother. When she turned 14, she got married because she thought that if she married she would escape the misery she was living in. Unfortunately, things did not turn out that way. Now married, she was faced with serving her husband’s whole family, working the land, and being beaten like an animal.

After five months of this misery and violence, M.G. decided to leave her husband and go back to her mother. She started to work, but the job was only temporary and the money was not enough. When M.G. turned 15 she married again, but after six months left her husband and returned to her mother’s house a second time. After two failed marriages, it became increasingly difficult for her to live in the Roma community. She was unemployed, without an education or job qualifications, and her family was starving and blaming her. So one day she made the biggest decision of her life: she decided to sell her body for food for her and her family. Instead of attending school and living her teenage life, this 17-year-old girl is on the road between Sofia and Plovdiv, risking her health and hoping that someday things will be better.

M.G.’s story shows how the complex problems of poverty and unemployment among Roma can lead to prostitution for some Romani women. But Romani women should not have to sell their bodies and their dignity to survive.

The best way to prevent forced prostitution is to create more opportunities for income and economic empowerment. Sustainable improvements in the labor market, as well as adult education programs and social services such as support groups, would provide individuals and families other options for making a living.

M.G.'s story points to another very important issue: the situation of Roma youth of today. There is a need to invest in today's Romani youth, since the majority is at risk of falling into the same trap as their parents. Growing up during "transition," young Roma have spent nearly all their lives listening to their parent's problems with unemployment and poverty, their inability to buy things for the children or even food for the week. The result is many Roma youth today have no vision of their future, no dreams.

A large proportion of Romani youth either do not complete a secondary education or they complete vocational schools which do not provide them with relevant skills for today's labor markets. Through our work with Romani youth, we recognize the need for policies and programs to enable youth to complete higher education and compete in the labor market. Governments, together with Romani NGOs, should identify ways to reintegrate young Romani adults who have left the educational system in order to get temporary employment in agriculture or public works, to marry, or to raise children and care for the family. It must be understood by all that a greater investment in today's youth will mean less investment in social services in the long run. Currently, young Roma risk becoming socially dependent and repeating the cycle their parents began when they became unemployed in the context of economic transition.

Government and donors should identify and implement proactive, strategic measures targeting Romani youth, including specific approaches for Romani women. A good first step would be to set up Romani youth commissions or working groups to provide information on the specific problems and needs of youth as well as possible program strategies. This would be especially fruitful when creating measures for young Romani women, taking into consideration the complexities surrounding the roles of Romani women in the family.

### **Nicoleta Bitu**

“Government strategies to improve the situation of the Roma should be gender-sensitive in design, approach, and implementation.”

We call upon governments to respect the commitments made in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth UN World Conference on Women. It is important to recall that the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) recommends, in its General Policy Recommendation No.3, to “pay particular attention to the situation of Roma/Gypsy women, who are often the subject of double discrimination, as women and as Roma/Gypsies.”

Taking this into account, governmental strategies to improve the situation for Roma, along with poverty-reduction and regional development policies, should be gender-sensitive in design, approach, and implementation. In particular, quotas should be introduced to support Romani women's participation in vocational training and other income-generating programs. Experience with vocational training programs in the region proves the importance of teaching skills that respond to local labor market needs, so that prospects for job placement after the program are realistic. Helping Romani women gain economic empowerment will also require that states make a sincere effort to combat discrimination and provide equitable employment opportunities and treatment.

One position of women's advocates in a number of countries around the world, including South Africa, is that states employ a gender budget strategy, which weighs the contributions of women's labor (such as household work, etc.) against the total economy and advocates equivalent and thus more equitable distribution of resources to women.

In post-conflict countries there should be greater attention paid to women and children in terms of safe return and access to information about the programs available for reconstruction.

We encourage international organizations to support regional initiatives for economic empowerment of Romani women, based on previous experiences UNIFEM has had with traditional cultures and poverty. Romani issues, including Romani women's issues, should be mainstreamed into the agendas of the UN Economic and Social Council, the Economic Commission for Europe, the OSCE Economic Forum, the EU/ European Economic and Social Committee, and other working groups and experts meetings.

International organizations may also consider coordinating their efforts to influence the implementation of states' commitments while encouraging greater gender sensitivity.

Finally, in working toward the UN's Millennium Development Goals, concrete attempts should be made to empower Romani women to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. In so doing, it is important that the situation of Roma be considered separately from the national-based figures, since the latter do not reflect the everyday reality of the majority of Roma in the region.



## **Breaking the Silence: The Sexual and Reproductive Rights of Roma Women**

### ***Panelists***

**Barbora Bukovska**, executive director for the Centre for Civil and Human Rights in Slovakia and staff attorney and projects coordinator at the Counseling Centre for Citizenship, Civil and Human Rights in Prague.

**Viola Horvathova**, coordinator for Slovakia for the Pakiv European Roma Fund and chair of an organization doing development work in her local Roma community.

**Vera Kurtic**, founder and president of the NGO Women's Space in Serbia.

**Mária Vamosiné Pálmai** is founder and president of ARANJ Organization for Roma Women's Rights in Hungary.

### ***Respondent***

**Anna Karamanou**, a member of the European Parliament since 1997 and chairperson of the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities since 2002. She is also a founding member of PASOK, the Greek Socialist Party, and the NGOs "Helsinki Citizens Assembly" and "the Citizens Movement Against Racism."

### **Viola Horvathova**

“Many of the women we spoke to declared that their consent for sterilization was given based on misinformation, manipulative information, pressure, physical abuse, and/or tricks.”

In 2002, I was a part of a team that worked on a research study about Roma women in Slovakia, with a special interest in the issue of health care and sterilization.

The European Roma Rights Center undertook a field mission to Slovakia to investigate reports that coercive sterilizations (contraceptive gynecological procedures without the full and informed consent of the patient) continue to be performed on Romani women. This research has been done mostly in eastern Slovakia, which has the highest concentration of Roma communities.

Historically, the Czechoslovak government sterilized Romani women as part of policies aimed at reducing the “high, unhealthy” birth rate among Romani women. A regular feature in public discourse on Roma is that they will outnumber the Slovak population around 2050. Throughout the late 1990s, there were periodic indications that the practice of coercive sterilization was continuing.

The investigative report, *Body and Soul: Forced Sterilization and Other Assaults on Roma Reproductive Freedom in Slovakia*, released by the Center for Reproductive Rights in New York and a Slovak group, the Counseling Centre for Citizenship, Civil and

Human Rights, states that Roma women are being coerced and in some cases forced (without informed consent or without consent of any kind) to submit to sterilization in eastern Slovakia's government-run health facilities. The report, based on approximately 200 interviews with Roma women who gave birth in the last five years, documents more than 100 cases of Roma women either forcibly or coercively sterilized. It also documents extensive racism and verbal and physical abuse directed toward Roma women in public hospitals, including the denial of patient access to their own medical records and the segregation of Roma in rooms, maternity wards, restrooms, and dining facilities.

Based on our investigation, we concur that coercive sterilization of Roma women is ongoing in Slovakia. Many of the women we spoke to declared that their consent for sterilization was given based on misinformation, manipulative information, pressure, physical abuse, and/or tricks. Some received a caesarian section without any information or explanation, and later discovered that they were no longer able to conceive. These women suspect they were sterilized without their consent, but have no proof. Others were pressured into consenting to sterilization while in pain.

In the Slovakian health care system, Romani women face such discriminatory practices as the receipt of inadequate health care, misinformation on health matters, and separate hospital rooms from non-Roma women. Romani women are particularly vulnerable to multiple forms of discrimination and human rights violation because they bear the double burden of both race and gender stereotypes.

Primary responsibility for the human rights violations suffered by Romani women is attributed to and must be addressed by the Slovak government. Possible first steps to remedy the practice of forced or coerced sterilization are sensitivity training for both government officials and health care providers who need to update their views on ethnic identity and cultural differences, health and reproductive rights education for Romani women, and a campaign to increase overall awareness of the insidious health care conditions faced by Romani women in Slovakia.

### **Barbora Bukovska**

“We are requesting that the Slovak government to express a clear political will to address human rights violations towards Romani women, deplore forced and coercive sterilization practices, apologize to victims, and commit to holding violators accountable.”

In January, my organization, the Counseling Centre for Citizenship, Civil and Human Rights, in collaboration with the Center for Reproductive Rights in New York and an independent consultant, Ina Zoon, published *Body and Soul: Forced Sterilization and Other Assaults on Roma Reproductive Freedom*. The report documents the widespread abuses of Romani women's reproductive rights, such as coercive sterilization, segregated maternity wards, and other discriminatory practices in hospitals in Eastern Slovakia.

What does this mean in practice? It means when a Romani woman in Eastern Slovakia goes to the hospital to give birth or to have gynecological surgery, she will be placed in a segregated or “Gypsy” room, which is far inferior to the standard rooms for “white” women. A Romani woman will also not be allowed to use the same bathroom or toilet as white women and enter other facilities, like the dining room or snack-bar. She will most likely be called a stupid, dirty Gypsy, or a Gypsy whore, and be accused by doctors and nurses of having children only to get more social benefits from the state. She might be beaten, or slapped in the face while giving birth, or even deprived of help during delivery. If she gives birth via cesarean section, she might very well return home from the hospital sterilized without her full or informed consent. If she gives birth naturally, she might have an IUD inserted against her will that the doctor refuses to remove until an allotted period of time expires. And finally, a Romani woman will be denied access to her own medical files and thus prevented from seeking vindication of her rights in court.

Since the findings of the report were made available to the public, the Slovak government initiated two inquiries into the issue of forced sterilization. One is a criminal investigation by law enforcement agencies. The other is an administrative investigation by the Ministry of Health, which sent their own experts to hospitals in Eastern Slovakia. The initiation of these proceedings is definitely a positive development as the Slovak government expressed willingness to examine the issues raised by the report. However, the way in which these investigations are developing raises serious concerns to us and to the victims of these violations.

First of all, the investigations are focusing on only one hospital, in Krompachy, and only for the period of 1999–2002, although our report indicates dozens of hospitals in Eastern Slovakia and decades of reproductive rights violations. Secondly, both groups of investigators have been ignoring the core issue of the problem which is whether Romani women gave informed consent to the medical procedures performed on them. The investigators simply went to the hospital, opened women’s medical files, and found that they contained signed documents and automatically considered those documents proof of consent. However, in the report we point out how women are often tricked, misinformed or forced to sign documents permitting sterilization. Therefore, it is the conditions under which those signatures have been obtained which must be examined.

At the same time, the Slovak government filed a criminal complaint against us, the authors of the report, for two crimes. The government claims that we should be criminally prosecuted for spreading false rumors and creating a panic in society (although I do not know who is panicking except, perhaps, those who committed the violations). The other complaint is failure to report the crime, should the findings of the report be proven true.

We are not concerned about the threats of these criminal investigations but we are concerned about the message it sends to the Roma communities, as well as to the medical personnel. It is like saying to victims: whatever happens, human rights defenders will be

prosecuted, and to doctors: do not worry; we will go after human rights defenders either way.

I and the other lawyers of Poradna have also been working to bring cases to court in order to obtain compensation for the victims. However, we have been prevented from doing so because hospitals, with the support of the Ministry of Health, have refused to give Roma women and us— their attorneys—access to their medical files, despite the fact that it's required under Slovak law. In addition, court experts are refusing to evaluate damages, also required by Slovak law, and thus, effectively denying Roma women access to justice. Since the launch of the report, there also has been retaliation in the form of harassment of Romani women from both the law enforcement agencies and hospitals and medical personnel.

In light of these developments, we are requesting that the Slovak government to express a clear political will to address human rights violations towards Romani women, deplore forced and coercive sterilization practices, apologize to victims, and commit to holding violators accountable.

### **Vera Kurtic**

“There are no shelters for Roma women domestic violence victims, and Roma women activists who try to protect the victims are also exposed to violence.”

At Women's Space, I work to educate Roma women and girls in the field of women's human rights. During my early years as an activist and volunteer with the SOS Hotline for battered women and children, I realized that the problem of violence against women was not receiving adequate attention. As a Roma woman and a victim of violence, it seemed natural to steer my career in the direction of promoting one of the basic human rights: living free of any form of violence.

In 2001, Women's Space conducted research on domestic violence in Roma settlements in Nis, an area of southern Serbia. We found that 100 percent of the women who participated in the study suffer from psychological abuse, and 94 percent have experienced physical violence. Some of the remaining 6 percent expressed that their husbands have slapped them in the face as a joke, but did not wish to describe this as violence. Our research also found that in addition to husbands, violators include fathers-in-law and other members of the husbands' families. A significant 67 percent indicated their mothers-in-law as violators.

Although only a very small number of women recognized that they experienced violence before they were married, close to 90 percent of women said that their husbands beat them and their children, and also that their mothers had been in violent marriages. This suggests that many women likely suffer from violence from early childhood.

While violence tends to escalate if women try to end their marriages, 32 percent of women said that physical violence stops as their husbands grow older.

However, other forms of violence never end. Economic violence is present through the form of general poverty. Considering that most Roma women are unemployed, economic violence is mostly seen through loss of human dignity, poverty, and being forced to take care of the entire family with little or no support from their husbands. Women spoke out about the hunger and humiliation they suffer because men often gamble away the family's income. There is also the custom of the mother or father-in-law "taking care" of the family funds.

Few Roma women wanted to discuss sexual violence. The primary reason is their inability to recognize this form of violence and the common belief that it is a wife's duty to please her husband. Nevertheless, about 20 percent confirmed that they have experienced rape within their marriages.

As far as incest is concerned none of the women wanted to speak about their personal experiences, though 41 percent claimed to know of such cases existing in their immediate surroundings.

Roma women are reluctant to speak out about the violence they suffer, because, among other reasons, they do not recognize the violence as violence and they fear rejection and/or expulsion by the community, as well as the loss of social and economic security.

Seventy-two percent of women have done nothing about the fact that they endure violence. Of the 26 percent who left the violent home for good, most remarried and ended up in violent marriages again. Only 6 percent of all the women questioned said they requested assistance from the police and courts. In two cases, the police never responded to the call. In two other cases, neighbors, not the victims, called the police. There were only four accounts of the violators being taken into custody and charged.

The women questioned had no knowledge of organizations (i.e., SOS Hotline) that deal with domestic violence. The predominant police attitude is that these situations are "private" and/or "gypsy" business. The police do not react to domestic violence calls within Roma settlements although calls for help rarely occur since Roma settlements usually lack basic utilities (i.e., phone lines). Medical staff, judicial officials, and social services' clerks also work from a position of prejudice and provide different treatment for Roma women.

Forty-nine percent of the women said that the violence they suffer is kept a secret and never addressed. The others said they had been advised to divorce (12 percent), they had the protection of their biological family (24 percent) or they received assistance from neighbors (15 percent).

Within Roma organizations only Roma women's NGOs are working with this problem. There are no shelters for Roma women domestic violence victims, and Roma women

activists who try to protect the victims are also exposed to violence. The prevailing attitude within the Roma population is that this is a matter that needs to be dealt with within the Roma population and not exposed to the non-Roma as a problem.

### **Mária Vamosiné Pálmai**

“Obligated to serve their husbands and children, Roma women are not permitted to tend to their own dreams, desires, or even health.”

I am a 23-year-old mother of three. I come from a traditional Keldarash-Lovari Romani family and live in Pécs in south-western Hungary, a city of 160,000 inhabitants. I am also the president of ARANJ, the first Roma women’s organization in the Hungarian countryside.

ARANJ was established by young Roma women living in traditional communities to advocate for Roma women’s issues both on the local and national political agenda. ARANJ strives to give a voice to Roma women primarily by organizing grassroots campaigns, assisting Roma women in establishing their own economic independence and developing a network of organizations that advocate for their rights.

Our publication *On Virginity* presents the findings of a survey organized, conducted, and analyzed by Roma women on the sexual taboos and the virginity cult in Romani communities. The Open Society Institute’s Network Women’s Program funded a similar survey in Macedonia two years ago. ARANJ was the second Roma women’s organization to conduct this survey, and it will be followed by similar initiatives run by Roma women in Slovakia, Serbia, Romania, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria.

The survey findings clearly demonstrate that Roma women are convinced that the tradition of the virginity cult is harmful. A majority of us think that Roma women are prevented from exercising their own will and that their parents unfairly control decision-making in their lives. Most Roma women do not even finish elementary school because they are required to enter into arranged marriages in their teens. Soon after they marry, they begin to have children. Obligated to serve their husbands and children, Roma women are not permitted to tend to their own dreams, desires, or even health. Yet we continue to preserve and practice this early marriage custom.

If girls were more mature when they married, they would have a better understanding of the world and knowledge of life outside the community. However, because socializing outside the family is believed to put their virginity at risk, young Roma women are most often prohibited from experiencing the world and attending school. This custom not only harms a woman’s connectedness to the world, but also, in some cases, results in tragedy.

The story of 19-year-old Szilvia from my community illustrates how harmful preserving such a custom can be. Szilvia was to marry her cousin at the age of 16, a marriage

arranged by their parents. Her cousin had been previously married and had children from that marriage. When he left Szilvia to remarry his first wife, it implied that he was dissatisfied with her as a wife and that his previous wife was a better *Romni* (traditional Romani woman) than Szilvia. This disgraced her father before the community. Szilvia met another man and fell in love after she and her cousin separated, but her parents did not approve. After internal spiritual struggle and feeling like she had no one to listen to her, Szilvia hanged herself in the forest next to the Roma settlement. This is only one of many tragic stories.

In the Roma community, 9 out of 10 traditionally arranged marriages end in divorce. With each divorce, a girl becomes stigmatized for life in the eyes of the whole community. In most cases, these divorced Roma women are in their early twenties, have two or three children, and have no education or job.

Where can these women go for help? How will they manage? Most women in this situation find that their families will not help them, so they are left to turn to the municipal government's housing and social assistance units. But then, who will take care of the children while they attend training classes at the local unemployment center for four hours a day, five days a week? And will this training lead to a secure income?

As a Roma woman, I know how important it is to organize effective training opportunities and launch well-paid employment programs for Roma women so they may be able to secure their economic autonomy and have a chance to realize their own lives independently of men. In order for this to happen, Roma women, especially those from traditional communities, need to participate in decision-making processes and have their own voices heard. Even though we may be undereducated and lack experience, we have our own rights and we want to exercise them.

## Challenges for Roma Women Politicians and Community Leaders

### *Panelists*

**Blanka Kozma**, founder and president of Association of Roma Women in Public Life, a member of the Committee of Employment for the Budapest Municipality, and president for the 5th District of Budapest within the Roma self-government.

**Gabriela Hrabanová**, an eRider technology consultant for Roma NGOs and founder and chairperson of the student group Athinganoi in Prague.

**Azbija Memedova**, coordinator/manager of the Roma Center of Skopje and a member of the board of the European Roma Rights Center.

**Slavica Vasic**, founder and president of "BIBIJA," the Roma Women Centre, in Belgrade, Serbia.

### *Respondent*

**Mona Sahlin**, a former deputy prime minister of Sweden and minister of democracy and integration issues at the Ministry Of Justice in 2002.

## **Blanka Kozma**

“Though many Roma women work in Roma self-governments, the nature of the minority self-government system empowers neither Roma women nor their communities.”

It is well known that there are very few Roma women in politics and even those who are involved in politics have very little actual political power.

Most of us in politics today started working as social workers in local councils during the state socialist regime in local councils. This work, although low status and low paying, at least allowed us to learn about the social welfare system. It enabled us to understand the methods of distributing public funds and to distinguish who was eligible to receive social support and on what basis.

The welfare systems have changed some from the past, but the results are equally modest for Roma women. Roma women and children are especially discriminated against since eligibility criteria for welfare benefits exclude those who have had the least chance to find a job and become insured.

The unemployment benefit system in Hungary is tied to paid work with insurance through the labor market. There are Roma and especially Roma women who have no chance at all to become part of this system. Research shows that one third of Roma adults are not entitled to receive social benefits and are not part of the social security system.

I have been fighting for 15 years to change the structure of a welfare system that leaves orphans and widowed spouses without social aid or social security. This group falls into an eligibility loophole if the deceased did not have the required number of years of employment. Not much has changed in that time. However, my legal aid center now makes it possible to submit a request for special assistance to the relevant ministry in charge.

The economic crises, rising unemployment among Roma, and the end of the universal welfare system have made it difficult to raise the education level of Roma women. Roma women who started their public careers under state socialism have few opportunities to help their communities other than to deal almost exclusively with welfare issues. Few resources remain for pursuing other activities.

When political changes took place, Roma social workers and Roma employees working in the public sphere were swept out of the system into local minority self-governments and nonprofit organizations. While in theory Roma minority self-governments are independent institutions, in practice the power and effectiveness of their personnel are inadequate. Though many Roma women work in Roma self-governments, the nature of the minority self-government system empowers neither Roma women nor their



communities. They often lose the respect of their communities since their presence does not bring noticeable results. Additionally, mainstream local governments have been known to avoid involving minority government representatives and can set their policy agendas without addressing issues important for the Roma community. The system produces scapegoats among Roma representatives instead of providing them with actual power and financial means to do effective work.

Numerous NGOs for the Roma have been established in the past 10-15 years, and these organizations have become one of the most important means of establishing possibilities for the representation of the Roma. Some of these NGOs are led by Roma women and try to focus on issues relevant to women and children. While we know that the mere presence of a woman leader does not necessarily mean that she is willing to fight for the goals of the community, it must be stressed that much positive achievement has been reached by these organizations and numerous women have become known for their devoted work. It was a local woman leader, for example, who made sure that a residential area for Roma, which officials promised would be quality housing, was not built next to a prison and turned into another ghetto.

For the future development of Roma women's public participation, there needs to be support for the documentation and mapping of the situation of Roma women in the country. This knowledge would help identify the real goals of the Roma women's movement and strengthen Roma women's networking. As Hungarian data protection regulations do not allow inclusion of ethnicity as a category of social statistics, regular research by cooperating academic centers and NGOs could provide good alternative analyses of the situation of Roma women.

Another important level of Roma rights representation is the presence of Roma in governmental offices. Positions made available for the Roma and Roma women at ministries and governmental offices, although these involve no more than 10-15 people, must be considered a significant achievement. But of course this achievement is only a first step. The Hungarian government must make a commitment to implement an effective affirmative action program in education, housing, and employment, with special attention to Roma women.

Political parties have not offered real opportunities for the representation and political participation of Roma women. One hopes that the new law on anti-discrimination and equal opportunity to be enacted soon by the Hungarian Parliament will provide an opening for Roma women to demand their rights and greater leadership roles in this country.

## **Gabriela Hrabanová**

“To me it is clear that the best way to integrate Roma into society is to facilitate their participation in political life on every level both as citizens of the Czech Republic and as members of political parties.”

According to official figures from the 2001 census, there are less than 12,000 Roma in the Czech Republic out of a total population of about 10,250,000. However, more realistic estimates put the number of Romani between 150,000 and 300,000—as much as 2.9 percent of the total population. Unlike most other countries in the region, Czech Roma are concentrated in urban and industrial areas. Roma in the Czech Republic are poorer than non-Romani citizens, more likely to be unemployed, and often fully dependent on social and unemployment benefits. Discrimination is a regular feature of daily life, manifesting itself in a lack of access to employment, housing, and health care, and restricted access to restaurants, sports facilities, and other public spaces.

As a minority in the Czech Republic, Roma—especially Roma women—are underrepresented in public life, even within institutions that deal with their issues. It is often argued that Roma have no education and are unprepared for jobs in the government or NGOs. However, many Roma women in the Czech Republic successfully finish high school and continue on to university. Some of them have the qualifications necessary to work in higher positions in public life. However, there is a general lack of interest among Roma women in pursuing political careers, and little information available that might increase or guide this interest. To me, the best way to integrate Roma into society is to facilitate their participation in political life on every level, both as citizens and as members of political parties.

My personal experience demonstrates it's possible for Roma women to have political careers. I recently participated in an OSI-supported eight-weekend seminar, Roma Political Leadership Program. The most important topics included a review of the national electoral system, a survey of political parties, state budgeting, international human rights law, European Union structure, Roma history, and the history of Czech public policy.

Each seminar participant was required to do an internship, and, after hearing the mayor of Prague speak at the seminar, I chose to do mine at the City Hall of Prague in the mayor's office. A couple of months later, when the mayor began to prepare a local election campaign for his political party, he put me on the candidate's list. I participated in the campaign and talked to voters at the polls. Finally, even though I did not get elected, the mayor's party offered me a position in the Council for Nationalities in the City Hall of Prague.

In addition to the Roma Political Participation Program, another initiative, the Self-Confidence Project, offered by the Roma women's group Manushe, is available to Roma women who seek greater involvement in political life. Now in its third year, the aim of

this project is to strengthen women's self-confidence, self-respect, and solidarity, enabling them to become more assertive both in their professional and personal lives.

The Roma question is a hot issue now, especially in the current climate of EU enlargement. Most of the political parties in Europe address the Roma issue in their programs, but still they are not willing to invite Roma people to become party members or candidates. Therefore, it is very important to motivate Roma women to become involved in public life, learn new professional skills, and build their self-confidence. It is also necessary to provide them with the theoretical background and practical training to serve as credible candidates for elected office.

As more and more Roma women become involved, it is our hope that attitudes toward Roma women will improve and the ability of Roma women to lead independent lives will strengthen.

### **Azbija Memedova**

“Building a better society and integration of Roma women can not happen by itself; it is an interactive process with at least two players—the one who has power and the other who does not. The basic precondition for a better society is the willingness of both to listen and understand.”

Basic historical analysis suggests that the development of the Roma women's human rights movement has a lot in common with human rights movements of women belonging to other minorities. Minority women are vulnerable both as women and as members of minorities. They suffer a double disadvantage, first by virtue of their gender and second by virtue of their membership in a minority; in some cases they even suffer a triple disadvantage, when they live in marginalized areas, when they are forced to become refugees or migrants, or when they are victims of their own communities and families.

While there is clear evidence that women in general face similar problems in all parts of the world, that in no society do women enjoy the same opportunities as men do, the specific concerns of minority women, including Roma women, have not yet been studied and documented in a systematic way.<sup>8</sup>

Minority women are often excluded from public and economic life, as well as from all kinds of decision-making that affects them. Furthermore, the existing analyses show that Roma women are excluded from all segments of public and economic life in all societies.

Very often one can hear that this is a result of the patriarchal and cultural values as well as the level of education of the Roma community and Roma women's status within it.

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<sup>8</sup> Athanasia Spiliopoulou Akermark, *Human Rights of Minority Women*, 204 (2000).

The key word in the dialectical relationship between culture and minority women is *choice*.

For most women, who are privileged because they are born “white” and in a proper class, to be modern or traditional in our countries is a question of choice. But, unfortunately most Roma women do not have a choice, and this fact is not recognized as societal discrimination, but rather as a “traditional problem.”

Girls belonging to minorities are educated from the very beginning to accept their situation and the ideology of male supremacy. In the absence of alternative role models, they actually espouse and propagate the dominant social and cultural values that militate against their gender group.

This is where the role of society and women’s human rights organizations should be crucial: the society and women’s associations have an important task in pressing for education that offers the necessary support to minority women. These organizations have to assist women in intra- and inter-cultural discussions about traditional values and practices within their own group and the society as a whole.

When governments are not interested in fulfilling their obligations to provide equal opportunities to all, especially to those in special need, when there is a clear absence of gender perspectives within the Roma movement, and when mainstream women’s movements show little sensitivity to the special needs of Roma women, it is Roma women’s organizations that must, in the words of African American writer bell hooks, try to bring the “margins to the center.”

This is what Roma women activists have been trying to do since 1995: to build and promote new models, to raise their voices mostly within the Roma communities, and in recent years, in the larger societies and at the international level. Since then, those who have seen the disadvantages Roma women suffer are getting to know each other nationally and internationally, are growing up, learning and developing themselves, sharing experiences, fears, and visions, and trying to build new generations of Roma women activists.

Several Roma women activists came from the Roma political and social movement, others from the women’s movement in general and yet others have emerged from the grassroots level, the ghetto. Together they are building, step by step and from the bottom up, the international Roma women’s movement and a new kind of leadership that aims to create space for a better life for those being “marginalized among the marginalized.”

What are we fighting for? Teaching other Roma and non-Roma about ourselves, making them understand us, fighting for an equal partnership with all other organizations to participate in the building of more equal and better societies, where respect and opportunities for all will be the key words—that is our struggle.

Building a better society and integration of Roma women can not happen by itself; it is an interactive process with at least two players—the one who has power and the other who does not. The basic precondition for a better society is the willingness of both to listen and understand.

Since Roma women are doubly, or sometimes triply disadvantaged, the attention and efforts of state authorities for finding solutions for Roma women’s problems should be two or three times greater than when dealing with Roma issues in general.

### **Slavica Vasic**

“My experience tells me that the best strategy for advancing Roma women’s rights is to support increased political participation.”

The goal of the Roma Women’s Center in Belgrade, Serbia is to increase the visibility of the problems Roma women face in society and to articulate their needs for healthy living and sustainable work. Our work is to address the problems of Roma women through organizing groups of women in Roma settlements and holding workshop and meetings. This work is guided by the principle that through discussion of actual, authentically lived situations, the experiences we share with each other become meaningful and the lives of the women who participate are enriched.

The topics of our workshops deal with the position of women in the family and community, relationships women make over their life cycle, women’s health issues (both physical and mental), and other issues of interest. We also hold special sessions on women’s rights and how to enliven women’s rights movements in the Roma community.

Our vision and goal is to restore strength to Roma women, to empower them to fight for a better quality of life, and to awaken their confidence in their ability to change the current situation for Roma women.

In my experience working with Roma women, I have come to understand that one of the central reasons for their troubled position in society is that they are not involved in the political process. The connection between a troubled position in society and insufficient or nonexistent political participation is unbreakable and causal. When we consider issues of education, research or the healthcare system, it is clear that the exclusion of Roma women from the decision-making process results in a compromised position for Roma women within family and society.

I would say that Roma women make up the most marginalized community in our society. The trend of forming NGOs and lobbying for the protection of human rights has positively led to the establishment of the first Roma political parties and an international Roma network. However, these new legal entities are not doing enough to advocate for the human rights of Roma women.

The Roma women's rights movement is firstly organized as a network of NGOs. These organizations articulate the problems Roma women face in the family and society, and work to develop strategies for solving these problems. The NGOs also perform social work and offer humanitarian and legal help aimed at improving the status of Roma women.

My experience tells me that the best strategy for advancing Roma women's rights is to support increased political participation. This is also the experience of societies that are more politically and economically modern and more tolerant than ours. However, the political awakening of Roma women has only just begun—only a relative few Roma women are active in women's NGOs and Roma women's organizations.

One such example is the project "Roma Women Can Do It," in which Roma women, especially in Macedonia and Serbia, are participating in Roma women's advocacy, and several of them have become trainers. "Roma Women Can Do It" enables more quality access to the employment, health, and educational systems, as well as social and cultural life. The project helps Roma women become leaders and skilled negotiators, who are able to form their own opinions, face conflicts, bear criticism, develop political instinct and creativity, and motivate their compatriots.

Another example is the project "Your Voice, Voice of Difference," that ran from September 9-22, 2000. At that time Slobodan Milosevic was the president of the country. As part of the project we campaigned in the Roma communities of what was then Yugoslavia and promoted Roma women's activism by encouraging them to vote in the coming election. We were also campaigning for women's rights to become a political issue. We visited a lot of communities and talked to many Roma women, a large majority of whom had never voted before. These women did not realize that not only do they have the right to vote, but that voting is their civic duty. This was very interesting news for them, and when we returned to those communities later we learned that indeed some of the women did go to vote. About 450 women attended "Your Voice, Voice of Difference" workshops and we estimate that as many as half of them went to vote in the 2000 election.

Official data shows that there are 145,000 Roma in Serbia and Montenegro, although Roma leaders claim that there are approximately 800,000. The majority of these Roma are women. This is a big number for any political party. Their voices should be heard.

## **About the Roma Women's Forum Organizers**

### **The Roma Women's Initiative**

Started in 1999, the Romani Women's Initiative (RWI) is a partnership between Romani women activists and OSI's Network Women's Program (NWP). The RWI promotes the human rights of Romani women by empowering Romani women activists in Central and Eastern Europe, placing special emphasis on the participation and leadership development of young Romani women.

The RWI has linked Romani women activists in Central and Eastern Europe, conducted regional and national Romani women's rights trainings led by Romani women, supported the participation of Romani women in international agenda-setting conferences of the United Nations and the global women's movement, developed a website and directory of Romani women activists, sponsored the women technology consultants of the Roma Information Project, and produced the Roma Women's Forum. The NWP and the European Roma Rights Center cosponsored a workshop on Romani women's human rights in March 2004.

For more information about the activities of the RWI, please contact: Azbija Memedova, [centar@mt.net.mk](mailto:centar@mt.net.mk) or Dr. Debra L. Schultz, [dschultz@sorosny.org](mailto:dschultz@sorosny.org).

### **Network Women's Program**

The Network Women's Program (NWP), an initiative of the Open Society Institute, promotes the advancement of women's human rights, gender equality, and empowerment as an integral part of the process of democratization. NWP seeks to raise public awareness of gender issues, influence policymakers, develop gender-sensitive policies, and eradicate violations of women's rights. It works to create effective and sustainable women's movements, promoting exchange and cooperation among women's organizations, locally, nationally, and globally.

### **Open Society Institute**

The Open Society Institute, a private operating and grantmaking foundation, aims to shape public policy to promote democratic governance, human rights and women's rights, and economic, legal, and social reform. On a local level, OSI implements a range of initiatives to support the rule of law, education, public health, and independent media. At the same time, OSI works to build alliances across borders and continents on issues such as combating corruption and rights abuses.