

**THE EUROPEAN ROMANI WOMEN'S  
MOVEMENT—INTERNATIONAL ROMA  
WOMEN'S NETWORK**

BY RITA IZSAK

FROM CHANGING THEIR WORLD 1ST EDITION  
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# The European Romani Women's Movement – International Roma Women's Network

By Rita Izsak<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This paper aims to highlight how one particular Romani women's organization, the International Roma Women's Network (IRWN), is promoting women's rights, and to examine the connection between mainstream feminist movements and the Romani movement. IRWN is important because it is the first and only registered international umbrella organization representing Romani women of *all* Romani groups from most countries of Europe. In addition, the Joint Roma Women's Initiative (JRWI), a programme of the Open Society Institute, is also referred to several times and is introduced briefly at the end of the paper. Although it is not a registered NGO, it has played a determining role in shaping Romani women's international agenda.

## The Context and Situation of Romani Women

This case study does not aim to analyze the situation of Romani women in detail. However, it is useful to provide an overview of the main problems Romani women face in their everyday lives. While the following list is not exhaustive, and not all the issues prevail in every Romani community, these are the main challenges confronting Romani women:

- Double discrimination based on ethnicity and gender;
- Deprivation of education (so the woman can take care of the household and other family members);
- Virginity tests;
- Problems of accessing the health care system, including segregated maternity wards;
- Early and arranged marriage;
- High danger of being trafficked or forced into prostitution; and

### ■ Domestic violence.

It is evident that there is a clear need for targeted policies and strategies to remedy the special situation of extreme vulnerability of Romani women. It is relevant to note the very positive fact that two Members of the European Parliament are Romani women -- Ms. Lívía Járóka and Ms. Viktória Mohácsi - both from Hungary. Both work effectively to specifically raise issues concerning the situation of Romani women<sup>2</sup>.

In this case study, I will discuss the efforts of two major Roma women's organizations to tackle the oppression, exploitation and discrimination faced by Romani women throughout Europe.

## I. The International Romani Women's Network:

The idea of establishing IRWN arose at a meeting in Vienna in November 2002, when several Romani and non-Romani women from approximately twenty European countries came together

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1. Rita Izsák is a Roma rights activist, who currently works as a Consultant with the Civil Society Unit of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. She wrote this paper in her personal capacity.  
2. See EP Report on the situation of Roma women in the European Union, Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, rapporteur Ms. Lívía Járóka, February 2006

to discuss access to health care in Roma communities, in particular, among Romani women.<sup>3</sup> In the meeting, the participants talked about the problems Roma face when accessing the health care system such as discrimination, poverty and poor living conditions. They also raised concerns about traditional customs in some Roma communities that do not allow women to take part in decision making and which often restricts the access of girls to education, with negative impacts on their health. The participants then decided to create an international Romani women's network with the immediate goal of participating and lobbying in a forthcoming inter-governmental conference where a report on Romani women and their access to health care would be introduced.

In a follow-up meeting, in February 2003, the participants elected a temporary coordinating committee and adopted a Charter. Soraya Post, a representative of the Swedish Sinti community, became President of IRWN. The IRWN network was officially launched on March 8th, 2003, on International Women's day, to demonstrate the organization's commitment to women's rights. It has members from each Romani community (Roma, Sinti, Gypsies and Travellers) from 18 European countries.

It is important to note that IRWN did not grow out of the cooperation of already existing networks of national/regional/local women groups, with already well-defined visions and goals, and the merger being a way of enhancing their efforts on shared goals. It was rather a group of *individual* Romani women activists who have been working in different capacities and knew each other mainly from their participation in international conferences.

### Statute of IRWN

The IRWN Statute was drafted by a group of IRWN Board Members. The objectives of IRWN, as outlined in the Statute, are the following:

Article 4. The IRWN shall have the following objectives and tasks:

- *To lobby governments in the countries in Europe and develop recommendations to improve the overall situation of Roma/Sinti/Gypsy/Traveller women.*
- *To challenge individual and institutional discrimination at all levels, more specifically discrimination in housing, health care, education and employment.*
- *To give visibility to Roma/Sinti/Gypsy/Traveller women, and to articulate our agenda.*
- *To attain our basic human rights, which should be afforded to everyone in accordance with international human rights instruments.*
- *To ensure that our culture is recognized, respected, and resourced.*
- *To collaborate with governments in order to solve Roma issues from a Roma women's perspective.*
- *To encourage all international organizations and institutions which work on behalf of women and Roma, to actively support Roma women's organizations.*

Article 5 of the Statute lists the planned activities of IRWN:

(1) To accomplish its objectives and tasks, IRWN shall act on the basis of the Constitution and the laws of France, according to the rules for pursuit of an activity for the public benefit, which include:

1. Organizing and maintaining contacts and interaction with legal entities and natural persons in France and abroad;
2. Organizing fact-finding missions, "signal" networks, and other means of monitoring the human rights situation for Roma globally;
3. Maintaining a data base on Romani women;
4. Collecting information about international and domestic legislation, case law and other practices in the sphere of human rights;

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3. The meeting was organized by the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the then European Union's Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC – now called the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights).

5. Using all legal means to assist natural persons and organizations in the territory of France and abroad.

It is evident that these objectives and activities are rather general and do not reflect a particularly gendered or feminist approach, in that they often refer to the human rights situation of Roma in general. The objectives include the improvement of the situation of women, and call for collaboration with governments to “*solve Roma issues from a Roma women’s perspective,*” but there is no explanation about what the perspective of Romani women is, or how it will be articulated. In addition, although there is a mention of the collection of information about international and domestic legislation in the sphere of human rights, the statute does not mention the need for data, especially disaggregated data on ethnicity and gender, which is crucial to assessing the situation of Roma women.

The Statute also determines specific rules for membership in the organization, in its General Assembly, as well as for passing resolutions – but to date none of these are very clear. The lack of gender awareness is manifest in the fact that despite IRWN being a women’s organization, the Statute uses masculine references such as “any IRWN member may cease *his* membership of *his* own accord by submitting a written application”<sup>4</sup> (emphasize by the author), or “the *chairman* of the IRWN shall be elected for a period of two years...”<sup>5</sup> (emphasis by the author). Finally, since the establishment of IRWN, the achievement of its objectives in the light of planned activities have never been evaluated.

## ■ Allies of IRWN

From the time of the first meeting in Vienna, important inter-governmental organizations such as

the Council of Europe, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and the EUMC (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, now re-named the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights) assured the IRWN initiative of their support. In addition, the Advocacy Project<sup>6</sup> has held a series of training sessions with IRWN members, aimed at helping its member communicate as a ‘virtual’ network and to designate clear job responsibilities. IRWN received its first grant on June 1st 2004, in the amount of approximately \$8,000 from The Funding Network (TFN), a London-based group of funders that has pioneered an innovative new approach to supporting social change. This money was used to acquire technical equipment (computers, internet access) and to pay the membership fee to the European Women’s Lobby’s.<sup>7</sup> Since this grant, IRWN has not raised any additional funds, which is one of the main obstacles in carrying out its activities.

## ■ Activities of IRWN

The first public action of IRWN was the release of an open letter on April 3rd, 2003, protesting recent reports that Roma women were forcibly sterilised in Slovakia. The letter also claimed that Slovak policemen “intimidated” Roma women during the investigation.

As decided at the first meeting in Vienna, IRWN took part in the conference organized by the Council of Europe in September, 2003, where the report “Breaking the Barriers” was released.<sup>8</sup> The findings were based on research conducted in 15 countries on Roma women’s access to the health care system. In the meeting, IRWN President Soraya Post addressed the panel and expressed her concerns about the poor health conditions of Roma, the denial of health care to them, and her shock

4. Article 10. (1)

5. Article 23.

6. The Advocacy Project (AP), a Washington-based NGO, seeks to help community-based human rights advocates produce, disseminate and use information, and in so doing advance social justice. AP works directly with a selected number of partner organizations and offers them services aimed at strengthening their information and advocacy.

7. The membership fee for EWL (500 Euro) was paid by one single board member of IRWN from her own pocket in 2007, since the organization had no money left to pay its contribution.

8. Available at [ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/fundamental\\_rights/pdf/arcr/romawomenrep\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/fundamental_rights/pdf/arcr/romawomenrep_en.pdf) -

about the recent findings about forced sterilization of Roma women.<sup>9</sup> She called for a special meeting on reproductive rights and sterilization. The IRWN President also appeared at a press conference with the Deputy Secretary-General of the Council of Europe and with Ms. Simone Veil, France's Minister of Health, which reflected the serious need to address the problems of Romani women.

One of IRWN's most visible activities and achievements is the regular communication and news-sharing facilitated through its list-serve. Although there is no yearly average statistics available as of yet, between March and September 2007 alone, 120 information e-mails were sent out to 170 subscribers by Ms. Janette Grönfors, the Secretary and Communications Coordinator of IRWN. Out of the 170 subscribers, about 60 are organizations. The subscribers are mainly from Europe but also from Australia, South America and the USA.

From the time of its formation, IRWN has participated in lobbying efforts at various levels and as a result, is now a founding member of the first democratically elected international Roma entity, the European Roma and Traveller Forum (ERTF), where it has three delegates, and is also a member of the European Women's Lobby, where it has one delegate in the General Assembly. These membership opportunities were achieved through personal contacts and individual lobbying efforts undertaken by IRWN members.

### Major challenges facing IRWN

It is important to emphasize that even today, five years after the establishment of IRWN, the organization has no office, no paid staff, no website, and for some years, no money at all. This is why IRWN undertakes very few activities on its own and rather presents information and activities coming from its members. Because of the lack of funding, IRWN

has not been able to hold meetings and most importantly, could not convene its General Assembly which, among others tasks, is supposed to elect IRWN's President and Board Members every two years. Therefore, the President as well as the Board Members have not been affirmed in their positions since their election in 2003.

In addition, due to the lack of funding, IRWN has been unable to set up a work plan or strategy for its operation and this is why there is no vision or concept on how the organization can achieve its objectives. Communication is also problematic since some women in the network have real difficulties accessing the internet. Another obstacle to achieving its objectives is the lack of written records about the operation of IRWN in general (most of the information about the organization is found on the website of the Advocacy Project<sup>10</sup>), which makes assessment and planning extremely challenging.

As mentioned above, IRWN did not emerge as a result of national/regional/local cooperation of already existing networks. Therefore, it can not have the same impact on movement-building as other networks that arose from grassroots organizing efforts. IRWN members have different approaches, visions and experiences in the field of Roma rights. Some are more traditional, some more modern and progressive. Some have academic backgrounds, while others come from the business world. Some are part of the concerned communities, while others have a real disconnect from local communities. One Romani woman activist recently shared with the author the disappointment and pain that she felt when she visited a local Romani settlement where the people have not received any immunizations for 20 years, while she has been working as an activist in the same country for more than 16 years. She said her deepest concern was whether she had actually achieved anything during all these years of activism.<sup>11</sup>

9. She revealed that her own mother had been forced to undergo sterilization in Sweden or surrender her children to state custody.

10. <http://www.advocacynet.org/page/irwn>

11. The author wishes to express here her personal opinion about the self-evaluation of the achievements of Romani activists. She believes that disappointment and concerns come from the fact that Romani activists have extremely high expectations for themselves: they want to be academics, social workers, advocates, journalists,

IRWN has had difficulties finding its place and defining its ideology as a Roma organization aimed at improving the situation and representation of women. This became clear at the first ERTF General Assembly, held in December 2005. Although the Rules of Procedures stated -- for the sake of gender balance -- that three female candidates have to be elected to the seven member Executive Committee, only two women got seats. This happened despite the fact that there were 3 female candidates, which meant that they should have automatically become members regardless of the outcome of the votes.<sup>12</sup> When the author of this paper raised this issue with the ERTF President, just minutes after the announcement of the vote results, he told her directly that he was aware of the fact that there was a violation of the accepted rules, but claimed that he had to make "certain sacrifices in order to be able to maintain the Forum."<sup>13</sup>

What most concerned me was the fact that a fellow member of IRWN told me that I should respect our male leaders and not seek battles with them about such an issue. Later in an e-mail, she wrote:

*"I think we have to work more carefully with our movement and not scare our male leaders. I am sure we will have a lot of women inside the Forum's working commissions, personally I did not think the most important goal was to get positions. I thought it was to get respected and counted as competent equal Roma activists. I think this is a way to have a change inside our community as well as in the majority community."* (Identity suppressed)

The above case highlights the main challenges and confusions about addressing gender equality within the Roma community. The older generation

of Roma women believe and teach the younger generation that it is part of Romani culture to respect and follow our male leaders and to maintain peace through agreeing with them. This clearly became the gap between the younger (and progressive) generation and the older (conservative and traditional) Romani women. The author can recall statements from IRWN meetings when the older women argued that those Roma girls who wear trousers or lost virginity before marriage were not real Roma women and needed more guidance.<sup>14</sup>

These debates deserve even more attention when we consider that IRWN became part of the leading European women's rights umbrella organization, the European Women's Lobby, in 2004. Until now (December 2007), IRWN has not made good use of its membership and has not initiated any motions, mainly due to the lack of coordination and discussions between IRWN members prior to the EWL's General Assemblies. Therefore, IRWN became a participant but not an agenda-shaper in the meetings. Nevertheless, EWL's attention was caught by the legal case regarding the forced sterilization claims in the Czech Republic, after which its secretariat contacted the Czech members and asked them for action. While writing these lines, I am still waiting for the outcome of this intervention.

## II. The Joint Roma Women Initiative (JRWI) of the Open Society Institute

JRWI has greatly influenced the Roma women's rights agenda throughout Europe, and is led by such well known and respected women like Ms. Nicoleta Bitu from Romania, and Ms. Enisa Eminova and Ms. Azbija Memedova from Macedonia. The Initiative was launched in 1999 by the Net-

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campaigners, mediators and mentors all at the same time. The author is of the opinion that this is absolutely impossible and Roma activists should accept that tasks have to be shared and nobody can be good in everything at the same time. Otherwise, the author fears that these activists will always be pessimistic and sceptical about their own achievements.

12. A British Traveller, Ms. Catherine Beard, did not get a seat because she came after the first seven candidates based on the number of her votes.
13. Moreover, he said that if I wanted to make a big deal of it, I should stand on the desk and shout out to the people, and that he would watch to see how many of them would take me seriously with regards to the gender balance issue.
14. The loss of virginity before marriage was said to be a bad consequence of sex education, which some older Romani women members of IRWN believed to be dangerous for our girls.

## ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR OF IRWN AND JRWI

work Women's Programme (NWP) initiative of Open Society Institute (OSI), which "promotes the advancement of women's human rights, gender equality, and empowerment as an integral part of the process of democratization."<sup>15</sup> JRWI focuses on policy development, the integration of women's perspectives into the main Romani movement and works to create links between Roma women and mainstream women's rights movements. Each year, JRWI produces annual reports and strategies with a yearly budget of approximately 200 000 USD, which is approved by the Board of OSI.

One of JRWI's main achievements is the collection of contacts of Romani women activists who work in public life and are active in promoting the rights of Roma, especially Roma women. This database of more than 135 entries from 12 countries is available on the internet.<sup>16</sup> In addition, JRWI has run numerous trainings and workshops, as well as a virginity project conducted in seven countries aimed at promoting freedom of choice and gender equality. JRWI also launched a project in 2006 in 11 European countries to enhance the grassroots networking of Roma women.<sup>17</sup> This involved several young and educated Roma women – so-called National Focal Points – who conducted research in their respective countries concerning laws affecting Romani women and policies that include or target Romani women. The initiative started in November 2006 and in most countries is still running. The research conducted by the National Focal Points will be published in 2008. The main activities planned after the research are:

- Providing Romani women activists with education on various related topics such as gender equality and management (Macedonia)
- Establishing a national network of Romani women (Albania)
- Training young Romani women on gender equality and the creation of a national network. Design a national plan for Romani women (Bosnia and Hercegovina)

- Starting a process of education on gender equality for Romani women and men activists as part of Roma and non-Roma cooperation (Bulgaria)
- Setting up a national network of Romani women activists, including victims of forced sterilization (Czech Republic)
- Opening channels of communication between Romani women activists and gender equality networks (Hungary)
- Designing a strategy to mainstream gender, set up a formal working group for Roma women's rights, and provide this group with technical advice on issues such as women rights, human rights ideology, and diversity of women in the context of multiple discrimination (Romania)
- Supporting national networking among Romani women activists and connecting them to existing resources and networks. (Slovakia)

## Achievements so far of IRWN and JRWI

### 1. Showing solidarity with other Romani women – the case of Roma women refugees from Kosovo settled in Macedonia

Both IRWN and JRWI have taken action to address and try to remedy the situation of Roma refugee women from Kosovo. In March 2006, IRWN addressed a letter to Ms. Catherine Walker, Head of Office of UNHCR concerning the situation of Romani refugees from Kosovo settled in Macedonia. In this letter, IRWN expressed concerns about the "the situation of children who have not been able to attend school and have subsequently lost valuable years of their life and the ability to build their future" as well as about the "situation of Romani women who suffer for not being able to provide their families with the most basic needs

15. From the website <http://www.romawomensinitiatives.org/>

16. <http://www.romawomensinitiatives.org/directory.asp>

17. The countries are the following: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia

and raise their children properly”. IRWN asked Ms. Walker and others to take immediate action in order to make sure that the refugee children can attend school; to develop and implement training activities aimed to help refugees re-integrate into the labour market; to improve access to health care and ambulance services; and to improve communication with the refugees through hiring duly qualified Roma people.

In her response, Ms. Walker stated that UNHCR provides primary health care (as the Government does not); UNHCR had supported primary education in the past, but as this is a right of all children, the Ministry of Education should ensure the refugee children’s school attendance; and that communication between the refugees in Macedonia and UNHCR is plentiful and this is an area where complaints are not received. In this correspondence, there was no mention of the special situation of Romani women and for the need to have a specific policy targeting them.

JRWI held a meeting in Skopje, Macedonia, in December 2006, aimed at setting up the network of National Focal Points for 11 countries (see earlier discussion), to which the members invited two refugee women from Kosovo, Ms. Rozalija Rama and Ms. Miradija Gashnjani, to listen to their experiences as Roma refugees in Skopje. During the discussion, the two women identified the most pressing needs of their community: soap, other hygienic tools and warm clothes for children. Although JRWI members first thought that they could only offer capacity building and training as an organization, later, at the end of a lengthy discussion, they decided to show real solidarity and to open a bank account for these women where contributions can be received from all caring individuals and named it as “Solidarity Fund”. JRWI members also decided that the way the money will be used will be solely decided by the refugee women.<sup>18</sup> On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007, the Committee of Kosovo Roma Women Refugees held an internal

meeting to discuss their needs and possibilities to support certain activities with the available funds. Their decision was to organize and provide free of charge haircutting for all Roma refugees settled in Suto Orizari. For this aim, they asked the UNHCR office in Skopje to permit them to use one of the available areas in the Suto Orizari Community and adapt it into a hairdresser shop. On May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007, their request was approved.<sup>19</sup>

Besides setting up the “Solidarity Fund”, JRWI also sent an appeal letter to all Macedonian Embassies urging for action to remedy the situation of Kosovo Roma refugees in Macedonia.<sup>20</sup> The appeal letter was signed by 74 people and sent to several Macedonian Embassies. To date, no answer has been received.

## 2. A Milestone in the Roma Feminist Movement

A historical turn in the “movement” was when in May 2006, participants in a joint Roma women’s meeting – with members of both IRWN and JRWI – organized by the EUMC, started discussing sensitive issues such as arranged marriages and virginity tests. There was a clear gap between the thinking and understanding of the younger and older women. The latter refuse sex education in school and sex before marriage, while the younger women push for the acceptance of freedom of choice and equality with men. However, as a result of a long and rich discussion, the following were concluded and signed by 26 Romani women from 10 countries:

- *“There is not one single definition of a ‘true’ Roma woman. Roma women across Europe are just as diverse as any other group of women around the world. The concept of ‘a real Roma woman’ and ‘not enough of a Roma woman’ does not exist.*

18. The Solidarity Fund was opened on February 15, 2007. The total amount received in this account by July 1, 2007 was 84.540,00 MKD (approx. 1.363 €), 3.065 MKD from private contribution and 81.475 MKD from the Joint Roma Women Initiative.

19. The hairdresser is paid 100€ per month, and additional materials for the shop cost 67€.

20. The letter can be read here: <http://www.idebate.org/roma/newsarticle.php?id=966>

## ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR OF IRWN AND JRWI

- *We are aware of our differences, we accept them and we fully appreciate them.*
- *Everyone is free to choose their partner based on their sexual orientation and we shall not discriminate against and/or exclude homo/bisexual women from the Roma women's agenda.*
- *We want to preserve our Romani culture but also acknowledge that there are harmful practices which violate the human rights of Roma women."*

The statement further declared: "Roma women recognize the existence of double standards in the movement for human rights of Roma. Double standards should not be present. This refers to Roma activists who call themselves human rights defenders. One cannot fight racism in a society while discriminating others on the basis of gender in their community." Women in this meeting discussed early and arranged marriages as well as the practice of virginity tests<sup>21</sup> and concluded that:

*"[w]e, Roma women activists acknowledge the fact that these practices are harmful to young women and men and should be eliminated. These practices are not 'Roma practices' but they rather exist in every patriarchal society/community. Although these practices are present within the community, the Roma do not have the sole responsibility in overcoming them. We, the human rights defenders of Roma women believe that law must prevail and culture should not be used as an excuse whenever such practices are being performed."*

The acceptance of the above conclusion is a real milestone in the history of the Romani feminist

movement, since for the first time, Roma women from different countries, backgrounds, groups and ages managed to make a distinction regarding what is part of Romani culture, and what is a characteristic of patriarchal community traditions that Roma women have to fight against.

### Miss Roma International – a joint move to appeal against oppression of Roma women

The Miss Roma International beauty contest has been organized for several years in Skopje, Macedonia, by a Roma TV station, TV BTR Nacional. The station invites applications from Roma women and girls who are 16 years or older and requires applicants to weigh less than 121 pounds (55 kilos). The main organizer is Mr. Zoran Dimitrov, who besides being the owner of the host BTR television, is also the General Secretary of the International Romani Union, a founder of the Macedonian Roma Economic Forum, and a Board Member of the Roma International Centre in Macedonia. He faced protest against the beauty contest first in 2005 when a leading Macedonian Romani activist, Ms. Enisa Eminova, member of both IRWN and JRWI, expressed her disagreement with the competition.<sup>22</sup> Despite the protest, the contest has been organized and continued in the following years as well.

In 2007, the topic was discussed among a wider audience on the internet, when finally not only individuals but NGOs, including IRWN, raised their

21. The participants defined these terms as follows:

Early marriage: Marriage between youngsters who are under age 18. Such marriages are usually not acknowledged by the state but by the community. We accept, however, that young people who 16 years of age or older can make such a decision with full responsibility.

Arranged/forced marriage: A practice where the bride and groom are chosen by the parents and other relatives. We accept, however, that arranged marriages can end successfully in some cases.

Virginity tests: In some areas, women are still expected to remain a virgin until their wedding day and this has to be proven by a bloody bed sheet.

22. Ms. Eminova expressed her protest in the following manner: "I understand that BTR as media follows the trends in the world and does the same things but BTR must also understand that what the world does is not always the best thing for us to do. I agree that we have to learn from the world in the long run but I also know that we have our own stories that the world has never heard about especially regarding Roma women whose names are buried deep in the history and hopefully in a few people's memories. (...) I expect you as one of the leading Roma media to support Roma women in a more respectable manner. We have other things to say too. We are not beautiful dolls waiting for you to tell us who is the most beautiful of all."

voice as well.<sup>23</sup> Despite the fact that the message was at most times clear, there were some confusing comments bringing together arguments on culture and the expected behaviour of Roma girls, instead of simply refusing the concept of beauty contests. IRWN's President, in her separate individual statement about Miss Roma International, said that

*"[i]f you, Roma men, do not want to hold onto our culture any longer and respect our traditions, please do not pretend that you are Roma! (...) If you are Roma you know that the organization of so-called beauty contest is totally against our traditions. Our girls are not allowed to expose themselves as sex objects. They do not have to hide their bodies and wear long skirts but this kind of events are clearly unacceptable. (...) (I am happy to teach everyone who wants or needs so what kind of behaviour is acceptable within the Roma community.)"*

This statement clearly shows that the idea of free choice in dress and behaviour is still discussed within the categories of "real Roma" and the "not real Roma" and as a cultural issue, instead of the condemnation of oppression of women through such beauty contests regardless of cultural and ethnic aspects.

## Conclusions

If we focus on movement-building, one major task is to start building local/regional and national networks. This may sound odd since the natural process would generally be the opposite – to build a roof on the foundation. However, in the field of Roma rights, the fact is that many organizations formed as a result of available funds and support from large international groups and donors, and often lack a clear vision or goals, and do not have a firm base of grassroots or community support. Therefore, organizations have been more focused on how to organize their staff and do success-

ful fundraising, instead of how to actually build a movement and mobilize the affected Roma communities that face severe human rights violations. This is true for women's rights issues as well: organizational strengthening and movement building should be achieved through capacity-building and empowerment processes whereby large groups of women take part in the discussions and in the activism, so that the opinions represented at the international level truly reflect the views of grassroots or community bases of membership or support.

As we see from above, the process of evaluating the role of Roma women in their communities as well as in larger society, and of thinking critically about the education regarding Romani traditions that young women receive from the older generation, has begun. The joint women's statement (referred to on page 9) is definitely a milestone in that it challenged the thinking of Romani women and pushed all the 26 participants to "clear" the Roma culture from those characteristics that are typical of any patriarchal community and are masked as part of the culture in order to justify the oppression and discrimination of women.

From a feminist perspective, the biggest task for the future is to spread the message among the majority and among Roma people as well, that traditions like virginity tests, and arranged and forced marriages, are forms of oppression of women. They also represent a deprivation of freedom of choice and are human rights violations that should be fought against. This point of view has to be accepted, especially by those who call themselves Roma rights activists and represent the community in the name of defending human rights. Double standards in this regard can not be tolerated.

The problem, like in any minority community, is to bring these issues and debates "outside of the community" and admit that the Roma community itself is not united and has no common voice. Fear

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23. IRWN expressed the following: "Romani women have the right to respect and to dignity! They have a right to independent life! They have the right to joy and happiness! They do not need to be rated based on their physical appearance on the basis of criteria which are taken from picture magazines. (...) We call on Romani men to stand with us in our fight together against discrimination of Romani women. You cannot expect our support if you support attitudes and events which are discriminatory against Romani women. You have to understand that Romani people are one and there will be no emancipation of Romani people as long as Romani women continue to be oppressed!"

should not prevent Romani women from talking about their problems and seeking allies both inside and outside of their communities.

Another question is how Romani women can seek allies and assistance for their agenda. JRWI research shows that, unfortunately, mainstream women's rights movements almost always fail to include the perspective of Romani women in their agenda (or if they do, it is only in relation to special programmes designed for Roma).

Based on the author's research in Hungary, for example, women's rights organizations are not connected to a network of capable Romani women who could join them and help in addressing the specific problems that Roma women face. However, based on the author's discussions and interviews, these feminist organizations show real willingness to hire Romani advisors and start working with Roma women if they can identify and recruit interested and qualified Romani women.

Another obstacle is that the Roma rights movement itself (if we can call it movement) lacks a woman-sensitive approach. Although there are more and more Romani women in positions of power,<sup>24</sup> one must conclude that Roma issues are still represented mostly by male Roma leaders. This makes it more difficult to articulate an agenda for women.

At the moment though, finding allies seems to be easier, since Romani women are now part of the international human rights agenda. The case of IRWN shows that when there is organized action of Roma women from all over Europe, there is immediate attention on their issues. IRWN got its name known and has even managed to use it for lobbying purposes. However, IRWN needs to spend more time and effort on articulating a clear and comprehensive agenda instead of engaging in ad hoc and often spontaneous actions. But this

requires financial means to organize discussions and meetings, which seems quite difficult when we consider the number of members and the fact that they are residing in various countries across Europe.

In the past, when IRWN members finally managed to get together, discussions were often filled with tensions and conflicts, given the fact that members had no opportunity to simply talk with each other, but rather were pressed to discuss concrete agenda items and come up with conclusions on various topics when invited by a certain organization for a conference. Therefore, one goal for the future should be to allow IRWN and JRWI members to get together and freely talk to each other so they can create an agenda and a clear vision for both organizations' operation and, perhaps even more importantly, for their cooperation. This is essential if IRWN is to become a real agenda-shaper of the umbrella organizations where it is a member (EWL, ERTF) and if it is to have a role in developing Europe-wide policies. Such cooperation is also important if we consider the different strengths and weaknesses of the two organizations and come to realize that they could very well compliment each other: JRWI has the capacity to create annual reports and strategies, and has a budget, office space, and staff, whereas IRWN has full independence as a registered NGO and a wide opportunity to do advocacy and lobbying through the umbrella organizations where it is a member.

If IRWN and JRWI had the support of donor organizations to dialogue and come up with a concrete action plan for the upcoming years, this would enable them to actually start building a movement. These two initiatives can reach out to Roma communities and women in each and every country in Europe, and this unique potential should be used to influence Europe-wide and national policies that target or affect Romani women.

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24. These include for example the above mentioned MEPs; Ms. Klara Organova, Plenipotentiary of the Commission for Roma Affairs in Slovakia; and Ms. Maria Ionescu, State Secretary of the National Agency for Roma in Romania.

## ANNEX 1: Member organizations of IRWN

### **Albania:**

Unioni i Romeve te Shqiperise “Amaro Drom”;

### **Austria:**

Romano Centro;

### **Belgium:**

European Roma Information Office, (International NGO);

### **Bulgaria:**

Forum of European Roma Young People (FERYP), (International NGO);

Women’s Alliance for Development;

### **Croatia:**

Roma Women’s Association “Better future”;

### **Czech Republic:**

La Strada;

The Civil Association of the Roma Community;

### **Finland:**

Finnish Romani Association, reg.ass;

Nevo Roma reg.ass;

Romano Missio reg.ass;

### **France:**

Roma, Sinté & Kalé Women;

Union Socio-Educative Tzigane d’Aquitaine (USETA);

### **Greece:**

Panhellenic Union for the Poor and Homeless Roma;

### **Hungary:**

Association of Romani Women in Public Life;

European Roma Rights Centre, (International NGO);

Romedia Foundation, Hungary;

### **Ireland:**

Pavee Point;

### **Israel:**

Roma Virtual Network;

### **Kosovo:**

Kosovo Roma Refugee Foundation;

### **Lithuania:**

The Public Institution Roma Community Centre;

### **Macedonia (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia):**

Association of the Roma Intelligensia;

Council of Roma B&H;

LIL;

Macedonian Television: Roma News Department;

RCC Drom Kumanovo;

Roma Women Initiative;

### **Romania:**

Group of Initiative Roma Youth Association-Buzau;

mpreuna Agency for Community Development;

Romani Bari Botosani;

Romano Suno;

Roma Women Association “For Our Children”;

Tarna Rom, Moldova; Democratic Union of Roma;

### **Russia:**

Roma Ural;

### **Slovakia:**

Center for Civil and Human Rights;

European Roma Fund PAKIV;

League of Human Rights Advocates;

### **Serbia:**

“BIBIJA”- Roma Women’s Center;

Roma Education Center;

### **Spain:**

Drom Kotar Mestipen;

**Sweden:**

Internationella Romska och Resande Kvinnocenter;

**Switzerland:**

IOM Roma Issues Focal Point;  
The Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE);

**Ukraine:**

Congress of Roma of Ukraine;

**United Kingdom:**

European Dialogue;

Group National Travellers Action Group (NTAG);

National Association of Gypsy Women;

Save the Children;

**United States of America:**

American Romani Alliance;

**Poland:**

Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Roma & Sinti;

Organisation of Roman Woman in Poland.

 ANNEX 2: Timetable of IRWN activities

**November 25th, 2003:** IRWN Finnish members organized a demonstration on the streets of Helsinki against the deportation of Roma asylum-seekers coming from Central-Eastern Europe to Finland.

**January 2004:** IRWN alerted its more than 120 news subscribers about the eviction of 20 Roma families by a private contractor hired by the Council of Chelmsford in the United Kingdom. A campaign to protest against the action of the Chelmsford Council was coordinated by an IRWN member, the UK National Association of Gypsy Women, who addressed the Chelmsford police and the Commission for Racial Equality. As a result of the protest, the Chief Superintendent of Chelmsford Police, Ms. Julia Jeapes called for an investigation.

**March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004:** IRWN sent an e-mail to Mr. Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, concerning the welfare cut in Slovakia which resulted in street protests and raids by the affected desperate Romani population. In his response, Arhi Palosuo, head of the EC Slovakian unit told IRWN that the Commission rejected 'the use of any kind of violence as a way of making social or other claims.'

**Throughout 2004:** IRWN protested Finland's policy to deport Roma asylum-seekers from Slovakia. About 200 Slovakian Roma arrived in Finland that year, and nearly all were rejected. Roma activists say that the violence in Slovakia justifies their asylum claim.

**Throughout 2004:** IRWN asked its network of European members to lobby against a new British government housing policy that could possibly result in the segregation of Gypsies and Travelers. The British members of IRWN asked all members to send letters of protests to British MP Yvette Cooper, in the office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

**January 2005:** IRWN sent a protest letter regarding an incident in the United Kingdom, where a sick and elderly woman was among a group of Traveler (Roma) families who were awoken at 4 a.m. and ordered to leave their homes in the Twin Oaks

caravan park in Herefordshire. Reportedly, the woman's mobile home was demolished while she was still inside and her two wheelchairs were deliberately destroyed. The bailiffs also jumped on an elderly man who refused to leave, and broke his ribs.

**April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2005:**

A member organization of IRWN (the UK Association of Gypsy Women) warned that the "policy" of forcibly evicting Gypsy-Traveler families from their homes could result in deaths if it is not halted, and appealed to the United Nations and Council of Europe to intervene. The appeal has been sent by the UK Association of Gypsy Women to Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Alvaro Gil-Robles, the European Human Rights Commissioner, on the occasion of International Roma Day (April 8). The appeal came at a time when 3500 Gypsy-Traveler families were on the move in Britain, and another 500 Traveler families were facing eviction from the Dale Farm site in Sussex.

**IRWN Meetings (meetings where IRWN members had an opportunity to meet)**

December 2-4, 2007, Stockholm, Sweden, EUMC, Council of Europe & Swedish Government

"Our Voices Heard"

March 3- 4, 2006, Vienna, Austria, EUMC:

"EUMC Roundtable with the Roma Women"

October 14-15, 2005, Budapest, Hungary, Open Society Institute: "Roma Women Network (IRWN) & Ways for coordination on Romani women's issues"

March 31 – April 1, 2005, Vienna, Austria, EUMC:

"Roundtable with the International Roma Women Network"

November 8-9, 2004, Strasbourg, France, Council of Europe: "Training on campaign against discrimination on matter affecting Romani and Travellers women"

December 14-15, 2003, Cambridge, UK, OSCE:

"Training on "Forms of Effective Participation in Public Life"

September 11- 12, 2003, Strasbourg, France, EUMC & Council of Europe: "Conference on Roma women and access to public health: Ensuring effective access"