

The European Romani Women's Movement: The struggle for human rights

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ABSTRACT *Rita Izsák discusses the International Romani Women's Network (IRWN), the first registered international umbrella organization representing Romani women of all European Romani groups. She examines how IRWN is promoting women's rights, and the connection between mainstream feminist movements and the Romani movement.*

KEYWORDS *traditional customs; poverty; alliance building; racism; women's rights*

The International Romani Women's Network

The idea of establishing International Roma Women's Network (IRWN) (see Box 1) arose at a meeting in Vienna in November 2002, when several Romani and non-Romani women from approximately 20 European countries came together to discuss access to healthcare in Roma communities, in particular among Romani women.¹ 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 that often restrict 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 healthcare would be introduced.

It is important to note that IRWN did not grow out of the cooperation of already existing networks of national, regional or local women's 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 who knew each other mainly from their participation in international conferences.

Activities of IRWN

The first public action of IRWN was the release of an open letter on 3 April 2003, protesting recent reports that Roma women were forcibly sterilized in Slovakia. The letter also claimed that Slovak policemen allegedly 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.² The findings were based on research conducted in 15 countries on Roma women's access to the healthcare 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 healthcare to them, and her shock about the recent findings on forced sterilization of Roma women.³ 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 France's Minister of Health, which reflected the serious need to address the problems of Romani women.

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 (EWL), 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, 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.

As IRWN did not emerge as a result of national, regional or local cooperation of already existing networks, it does 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 back-

grounds, whereas others come from the business world. Some are part of the concerned communities, whereas others have a real disconnect from local communities.

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 three female candidates, which meant that they should have automatically become members regardless of the outcome of the votes.⁴ When the author of this paper raised this issue with the ERTF leadership, just minutes after the announcement of the vote results, she was directly told that the leadership was aware of the fact that there was a violation of the accepted rules, but had to make 'certain sacrifices in order to be able to maintain the Forum'.

There are challenges and confusions about addressing gender equality within the Roma community. The older generation of Roma women believes and teaches the younger generation that it is part of Romani culture to respect and follow Romani male leaders and to maintain peace through agreeing with them. This clearly became the gap between the younger (and often more progressive) generation and the older (often more conservative and traditional) Romani women. The author can recall statements from IRWN meetings when traditional women argued that those Roma girls who wear trousers or lost virginity before marriage were not real Roma women and needed more guidance.

These debates deserve even more attention when we consider that IRWN became part of the European women's rights umbrella organization, the EWL, in 2004. Until now, IRWN has not made effective use of its membership, and has not initiated any motions, mainly due to the lack of coordination and discussions among 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.

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 as Nicoleta Bitu from Romania, and Enisa Eminova and Azbija Memedova from Macedonia. The Initiative was launched in 1999 by the Network 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'. JRWI focuses on policy development and 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 US\$ 200,000, 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 twelve countries is available on the Internet. 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 eleven European countries to enhance the grassroots networking of Roma women.⁵ This involved several young and educated Roma women – National Focal Points – who conducted research in their respective countries concerning laws affecting Romani women and policies that include or target Romani women.

Roma women refugees from Kosovo settled in Macedonia

Both IRWN and JRWI have taken action to address and to try to remedy the situation of Roma refugee women from Kosovo. In March 2006, IRWN addressed a letter to Catherine Walker, Head of Office of UN High Commissioner for Refugees (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 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 healthcare and ambulance services; and to improve communication with the refugees through hiring duly qualified Roma people.

JRWI held a meeting in Skopje, Macedonia, in December 2006, aimed at setting up the network of National Focal Points for eleven countries (see earlier discussion), to which the members invited two refugee women from Kosovo, Rozalija Rama and 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 'Solidarity Fund'. JRWI members also decided that the way the money would be used would be solely decided by the refugee women.⁶ On 10 May 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 make it into a hairdresser shop. On 28 May 2007, their request was approved.⁷

In addition to 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.⁸ The appeal letter was signed by 74 people and sent to several Macedonian Embassies. To date, no answer has been received.

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 ten 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.
- 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 that '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,⁹ 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, as, 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 in addition to 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

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Board Member of the Roma International Centre in Macedonia. He first faced protest against the beauty contest in 2005, when a leading Macedonian Romani activist, Enisa Eminova, member of both IRWN and JRWI, expressed her disagreement with the competition. 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 voices as well. 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. One of IRWN's members, 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 '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, as 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 successful 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 the 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 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 greatest 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 cannot 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 should not prevent Romani women from

talking about their problems and seeking allies both from 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 agendas (or if they do, it is only in relation to special programmes designed for Roma).

Women's rights organizations are usually 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 a movement) lacks a woman-sensitive approach. Although there are more and more Romani women in positions of power, 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, as 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 in 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 that 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 non-government organization (NGO) and a wide opportunity to carry out 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.

Box 1

Member Organizations of IRWN¹⁰

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:

Rroma, 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

Poland:

Office of Democratic Institutions and Human
Rights, Roma & Sinti
Organisation of Roman Woman in Poland

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

Notes

- 1 The meeting was organized by the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the then European Union's Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC – now called the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights).
- 2 <http://www.ec.europa.eu/employment.social/fundamentalrights/pdf/arcr/romawomenrep.en.pdf>.
- 3 She revealed that her own mother had been forced to undergo sterilization in Sweden or surrender her children to state custody.
- 4 A British Traveller, Catherine Beard, did not win a seat because she finished 8th in the voting.
- 5 The countries are the following: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia.
- 6 The Solidarity Fund was opened on 15 February 2007. The total amount received in this account by 1 July 2007 was 84,540,00 Macedonian Dinars (approx. 1,363 €), 3,065 Macedonian Dinars from private contribution and 81,475 Macedonian Dinars from the JRWI.
- 7 The hairdresser is paid 100€ per month, and additional materials for the shop cost 67€.
- 8 The letter can be read here: <http://www.idebate.org/roma/newsarticle.php?id=966.0>
- 9 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 are 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.
- 10 Membership criteria and maintenance are still to be clarified. The members listed here are partners who cooperated with IRWN before and not Member Organizations in a legal sense.