

ROMANI WOMEN: BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

The collapse of communism and the transition to a market economy has brought particular hardship to Romani communities. Roma, long targets of discrimination in many countries of Central and Eastern Europe, suffer from high rates of unemployment and poverty as well as increasing hostility and violence from the majority population.

Romani women activists are struggling to find their place within the new Roma rights movement that seeks to end discrimination against the Roma while preserving Romani traditional culture and identity. They must negotiate a path between the changes of modern society and the practices of their

PHOTOS: Left, participants at the Leadership Training for Romani Women in Ohrid, Macedonia, October 2000, who built a "tower of power" for a leadership exercise; below, Romani students from DAJA, a Romani women's NGO supported by OSI-Macedonia.



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own communities. A crucial question remains: “Can they reconcile traditional beliefs about the role of women that are both a part of Romani identity and a source of inequality?”

The Network Women’s Program, in collaboration with other OSI network programs, seeks to help Romani women develop solutions to their problems and the problems of the larger Romani community. The Program’s Romani Women’s Initiative connects Romani women from different countries to map out the challenges they face and to resolve problems together, building a network of Romani women activists working at local, national, and international levels. The Women’s Program organizes leadership development opportunities for Romani women, respecting their role as mediators between the demands of modern culture and traditional Romani values, while asserting that Romani women’s rights are integral to a better future for all Romani people.

DEFINING THE ISSUES

The majority of the population continues to perceive the Roma in terms of poverty, unemployment, and low standards of living, rather than as a diverse people with shared linguistic, cultural, and ethnic roots. The upheavals accompanying transition have, if anything, intensified these perceptions. Yet the transition has also afforded Romani men and women the opportunity to

challenge their status as second class citizens. Within these changing societies, Roma are introducing a new language of ethnicity and cultural identity, of human and minority rights, of nondiscrimination and equality. They are engaging international human rights and multilateral organizations, especially within the European Union, including the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Commission on Human Rights.

Romani women are pivotal in this new mobilization. Women generally enter the Roma rights movement from the local level, working in the scores of NGOs that began to spring up following the collapse of communism. “For this reason Romani women activists are more aware, more open to new ways of dealing with problems,” said Azbija Memedova. A consultant on Romani women’s issues for the Women’s Program and director of the Roma Information Center in Skopje, one of OSI’s Roma Participation Program (RPP) centers, Memedova first became involved in the Macedonian women’s movement by working on violence against women and children. “Now we are trying to share this experience and knowledge with other Romani women,” she said.

Romani women activists, Memedova explained, must work on several levels—the family, the community, the wider society, and the international Roma rights movement. “If a woman manages to get out of the first, she faces the risk of expulsion from her community, yet she is not accepted as a full person in

the wider society. Non-Roma still see a Romani woman as a beggar in the street, holding a baby. They do not see a leader or an activist who deserves their respect. On the global level, the Romani woman has to fight with Romani male leaders, who no matter how educated and activist they may be, are still very connected to traditional roles.”

Education is a frequent focus of this tension. It sets in opposition those who fear educating their children will mean the loss of their Romani identity against those who see education as the best way to redefine Romani identity in ways that challenge, and ultimately change, persistent stereotypes that keep the Roma from achieving a better life. For women, the debate has a special urgency. In most communities, girls are not allowed to continue school after they reach puberty, often as early as 11 or 12 years old, at which time they are expected to marry and have families. “The parents become afraid to send them to school because they fear they will learn ‘bad things.’ Among other things, parents are concerned that there are evil boys who hang around the schoolyard,” wrote Sabina Xhemajli in the *Roma Rights Quarterly*, stimulating a vigorous debate about gender roles in the Romani community.¹

The high rate of illiteracy among the Roma, Xhemajli concluded, was one of the main causes of their historical economic and social marginality. For Romani women, education is an important way to challenge the double discrimination they suffer both inside and outside their communities. “The most important problem of Romani women all over the world is lack of education,” said Dilbera Kombarowsa, a Romani woman leader in Macedonia. Education enables them not only to find jobs but also to carry out their role as mediators between Roma and the institutions of the majority community, including the schools. Hristo Kyuchukov, a Romani

consultant to OSI on Romani educational issues, recalled how a women’s literacy project in Bulgaria quickly attracted husbands and other community members eager to learn.

The role of mediator is one that Romani women are increasingly assuming since the transition. Romani women are going outside the community to earn money, deal with the education of their children, and obtain health care for them. “The shift of responsibility from male to female in the Romani community is a common occurrence,” noted Bulgarian researcher Ivan Ivanov. “Many problems with the local authorities are resolved by a Romani man sending his wife to negotiate.”

Women are often at the forefront of efforts to challenge the discriminatory policy of placing Romani children in special schools for the mentally handicapped.² Katalin Stoika, who runs a Roma Participation Program center in Kalocsa, Hungary, has worked on this issue. In 1999, when Roma living in an abandoned army barracks had to be relocated, she discovered 25 children, ranging in age from 5 to 13, who had never been to school. After failing initially to get the local schools to enroll the children, she started a school for them in her own house. Letitia Mark, a board member of the Soros foundation in Romania, did the same thing in Timisoara. Soon the children were prepared to enter “regular” schools.

But schools are only one example. “In fact, women at the grassroots level ensure that their communities are opened to others, and they make the link between the two worlds: Gadge [non-Roma] and Roma,” said Women’s Program consultant Nicoleta Bitu. However, this is not easy. “These so-called ‘middle persons’ are the ones who confront the changes in modern society, but also have to fight the prejudices of their own society.”³ Bitu, a leader in the European Roma rights movement

and one of the first to articulate Romani women's issues, knows these challenges well.

GETTING TOGETHER—AND GETTING ORGANIZED

Concerned about the increasing acts of violence against Roma in Eastern European countries, the European Union sponsored the First Congress of Roma from the European Union in May 1994, in Seville, Spain. This historic conference was notable both for the presence of Romani women from Central and Eastern Europe as well as Western Europe, especially Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands—and for the striking absence of their participation and concerns in the final report.⁴

The absence of their perspective from the final report highlighted the lack of an organized Romani women's movement and the need for better research and knowledge about Romani women in different countries. In an effort to become better known, a group of women at the Congress in Seville issued the Manifesto of Romani Women. The Manifesto, unique in its reference to the situation of Romani women in both Eastern and Western Europe, primarily addressed external discrimination, particularly in education, and its impact on Romani women. But it also challenged internal discrimination, insisting that Romani women be allowed “to take full responsibility for the expression of cultural and traditional values as defined by Roma culture, even in contexts where these values are obstacles to such expression.”⁵

“One of the most serious problems plaguing us as Romani women is the lack of self-esteem,” the Manifesto stated, “and it is urgent to reinforce the consciousness of our worth and capacity to solve our own problems.”

The following year, the Council of Europe held a hearing on Roma/Gypsy Women in Strasbourg. The hearing was convened by the Council's Steering Committee for Equality Between Women and Men, reflecting a concern to address Romani women's issues within their gender equality programs rather than within the specific Romani programs. At the hearing, Romani women cautiously explained their problems in the context of discrimination against their communities rather than against them as women. For the first time, Romani women participated in a discussion on how to use international human rights mechanisms to improve their situation.⁶

LAUNCHING THE ROMANI WOMEN'S INITIATIVE

Romani women continued to work individually as activists at the local level and within the Roma rights movement. Then, in June 1998, the Soros foundations network convened the First International Conference of Romani Women in Budapest. Organized by the Roma Participation Program and attended by Women's Program staff, it brought together some of the key players in what would become the Romani Women's Initiative. The discussion aired a range of views on the role of Romani women at the intersection of traditional culture and the modern world.

The women who came to Budapest had different experiences and opinions about culture and identity depending on where they came from, but all were committed to improving the lives of Romani women and children. “We learned about differences from these meetings, since there is no research,” Memedova explained. “There were many Romani women who wanted to start something but did not know how,



Romani students from DAJA, a Romani women's NGO in Macedonia.

women in NGOs who were active in Romani women's issues, and women in Romani associations who did not see the need for women's rights."

The women agreed that it was important to retain many Romani traditions, such as those involving dress, family names, music, and holidays. Without these traditions, as one woman said, "we can't tell the

difference between Romani and non-Romani." But while some, mostly older women, did not see the need to change anything, many, especially the younger women, saw it differently. One thing they agreed on was the challenge of being a Romani woman activist.

Not only do Romani women activists confront traditional patriarchal views of women throughout

Central and Eastern Europe, they also face opposition from their families and communities, and even their activist colleagues, who oppose women taking on leadership roles. “When one stands against tradition, one is shunned from the family,” Sabina Xhemajli wrote. “And because for us the family and togetherness are very important, being shunned from one’s own family is the cruelest punishment.”⁷

Some at the Budapest conference thought the dilemma was worse for married women. One woman at the conference said that “married women, even educated women, can’t leave the house,” making it hard to become activists in Roma rights issues. But others thought it harder for single women, who, lacking the respect conferred by marriage and children, also faced hostility from other women, who often consider their activism a threat.⁸

The conference prompted a desire to establish a network of Romani women activists, bring more professional skills to their organizations and work, and begin to participate in international human rights work. Following the conference, the Roma Participation Program and the Women’s Program sponsored a joint six-month internship to coordinate efforts on all these fronts. Liliana Kovatcheva, from Bulgaria, took up the internship in the Budapest office in January 1999, and began to compile a database of Romani women associations and activists in Eastern Europe. In addition, the Women’s Program granted a fellowship to Nicoleta Bitu to participate in the Human Rights Advanced Leadership Training for Women program.

In April 1999, Bitu and Kovatcheva gave a presentation to OSI staff, designed to explore ways to support Romani women through the different programs of the network. George Soros challenged them to explain why Romani women’s issues were different than general

women’s issues. They highlighted the problem of children, especially girls, leaving school at rates generally higher than all other ethnic groups. They also cited the critical role Romani women play as mediators between the family and the larger institutions of society, especially with regard to education. They proposed a series of activities to raise awareness about Romani women’s issues both within the international women’s human rights movement and within the Roma rights movement.

In December 1999, OSI’s East East Program and the Open Society Foundation–Romania supported a conference organized by the Association of Romani Women in Romania on “Romani Women and Public Policies in Central and Eastern Europe.” Participants from Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, and Yugoslavia looked at the needs of Romani women and examined ways to use national and international rights mechanisms to promote Romani women’s rights. Among their priorities were increasing political participation, especially in decision-making bodies concerned with Romani policy, and improving Romani women’s leadership skills.

In October 2000, the Women’s Program, with support from the Open Society Institute–Macedonia and the Roma Participation Program, sponsored Eurozurally Romni, the first Romani Women’s Leadership Training Seminar in Ohrid, Macedonia, coordinated by Azbija Memedova and Nicoleta Bitu. The seminar was the first regional training organized by Romani women for Romani women and represented a significant new stage in the Romani women’s movement. Twenty-five women from Romani women’s organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Yugoslavia participated in the seminar. They honed skills to

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strengthen their work at the grassroots level in Romani communities, while creating a vision for expanding Romani women's activism.

The seminar focused on different levels of activism, from the need to become more politically involved, to ways to build women's solidarity, to how to start and manage an NGO. It included sessions on practical skills, including drafting project proposals, articulating their organization's mission, and developing fundraising strategies.

A major issue was women's leadership. "For me personally, being a leader is a big challenge, both inside and outside my community," said Senija Seferovic, of Croatia. "When I leave the community, people do not understand why I go, yet when I am among non-Roma, they do not understand why I am there."

At a roundtable during the Ohrid training, male activists in the Romani movement argued that women who failed to support men's leadership were failing to support the community. "All of the women, no matter what they thought about women's rights, stood behind Romani women in their discussions with the men," Memedova said. "This shows a new solidarity among women."

A small grants competition, cosponsored by the Roma Participation Program, enabled women who had participated in the training to carry out projects designed to address the immediate needs of Romani women and girls, primarily in health and education.

In response to the needs Romani women activists articulated at the workshop, the Women's Program and participating Soros foundations also offered specialized follow-up national seminars in Kosovo in December 2000 and in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia in 2001.

Outreach continued on the national level, linking Romani women activists and their allies. The first Slovak National Meeting of Romani Women Leaders in Banska Bystrica garnered significant attention in the Slovak media. With support from the Open Society Foundation—Bratislava and hosted by activist Andrea Buckova, the meeting followed three tracks: education, discrimination, and nongovernmental organizations.

Practical needs of the Romani, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities have been driving forces in the emerging activism by women in Kosovo. With the support of the Kosova Foundation for an Open Society, two participants in the Ohrid training started their own projects and helped bring together Romani women from all over Kosovo. After her visit to Pristina, Nicoleta Bitu noted the remarkable growth, strength, and commitment of Romani, Ashkali, and Egyptian women since the Ohrid meeting.

Two Romani women activists, Vera Kurtic, of Yugoslavia, and Nadire Selman, of Macedonia, will work with the Kosovar women as mentors. These mentorships are part of a larger collaborative project, Capacity-

Building of Romani Women’s Associations. In keeping with the goal to build and strengthen the women’s movement in transitional societies, the Women’s Program is working with the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to support the creation of five new Romani women’s associations in the region. This includes the first Romani women’s association in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The joint project provides technical assistance to Romani women’s NGOs, helping them to become better advocates for Romani women’s rights at the European level.

CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

Romani women activists analyzed the intersection of racism and sexism in Romani women’s lives as part of their preparation for the Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in South Africa in September 2001. During the European Roma Rights Center’s training session before the World Conference, the working group on gender, supported by the Women’s Program, identified three Romani women’s issues to highlight at the NGO Forum: involuntary sterilization, unemployment, and violence against women.

As participant Andrea Buckova recalled, Romani leaders only allowed them to discuss one issue—involuntary sterilization—at the Forum. Seen as an effort to reduce the Romani population and thus as a racist attack, sterilization was presented as a violation of Roma rights and not necessarily women’s human rights. In addition, “male leaders said that violence against women was not a big problem.” In contrast, participant Vera

Kurtic’s research among Romani women in settlements in Nis, Yugoslavia, demonstrated that 95 percent of the women had experienced some form of family violence. Buckova believes there is still “a big taboo based on tradition and the myth of the Romani family.”

Nevertheless, young Romani women are particularly eager to tackle taboo topics and are taking the lead in doing so. In Macedonia in 2001, 13 young Romani women formed a network and convinced the Open Society Institute–Macedonia to fund a project to address the problem of the “rigid tradition and the cult of virginity,” according to Women’s Program coordinator Marija Savovska. Seeking to open up discussion about premarital sexuality and the right to choose one’s partner, the young women will conduct research in 10 cities with Romani women and men between the ages of 18 and 25, as well as with their parents. The results will be published and used to generate public debate and education. Rumyan Russinov, director of the Roma Participation Program, hails this project as an example of the emergence of a more strategic approach in the Roma rights movement. He sees the Romani women’s networks as key to the larger Romani movement and the issue of early marriage as a priority.

Romani women activists of all ages are inspired by the changes taking place. “After two years I see more young women, and also older women, exchanging information and opinions and arguing out differences across the generations,” said Azbija Memedova. “At our first meeting, in Budapest 1998, the younger women sort of deferred to the older ones. Now there is a better balance. Younger women say, ‘I respect you but I expect you to respect my opinions.’ ”

Although the best student in her class growing up, Ildiko Lakatos, a young Romani woman medical student in Budapest, “always felt like I was considered just a

gypsy.” This resonated with several seasoned Romani women activists at a December 2001 meeting. “Welcome to the club of those who had to work harder than the others,” said one activist from the Czech Republic. Lakatos sees improvement at the university level, where “my fellow students can handle the fact that I am different.”

Another positive trend is more inclusion of Romani women activists in national networks of women activists, for example, within the Kosovo Women’s Network. As Slavica Stojanovic, a Women’s Program consultant for the Fund for an Open Society–Serbia, said, “We have no special funds for Romani women. Support for their work is integrated throughout the women’s program.”

Active participation of Romani women in all program areas has long been a goal of the Women’s

Program. In addition to Nicoleta Bitu’s women’s human rights fellowship, the Program’s information program area supports the development of a website for Romani women activists and training and mentoring for effective use of information and communication technology by Romani women’s NGOs. Developed in collaboration with the Information Program, Roma Participation Program, and the Roma Media Program, this project aims to build strategic and “virtual” connections within Romani civil society. The Women’s Program will continue to support Romani women’s leadership, as Romani women activists articulate their own priorities and challenge the international Roma rights and women’s rights movements to integrate their perspectives when creating advocacy agendas.

1. Sabina Xhemajli, “Everything We Don’t Want to Hear!” *Roma Rights Quarterly*, no. 1, 2000 (European Roma Rights Center).
2. Ivan Ivanov, “Response (6) to Sabina Xhemajli, ‘Everything We Don’t Want to Hear!’” *Roma Rights Quarterly*, no. 1, 2000. This pattern was condemned by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination as “de facto racial segregation” (ERRC 2000). A class action suit in the Czech Republic, dismissed by the Constitutional Court, has been brought to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.
3. Nicoleta Bitu, “Double Discrimination: Romany Women in Europe,” paper prepared for presentation to the OSCE-ODIHR Gender Seminar, Vienna, June 14-15, 1999.
4. Nicoleta Bitu, “The Situation of Roma/Gypsy Women in Europe,” paper prepared for presentation to the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, September 17, 1999.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Xhemajli, “Everything We Don’t Want to Hear!”
8. Nicoleta Bitu, “Response (7) to Sabina Xhemajli, ‘Everything We Don’t Want to Hear!’” *Roma Rights Quarterly*, no. 1, 2000.