

ROMA WOMEN CHALLENGE EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS OVER HEALTH  
CRISIS, CALL FOR SPECIAL CONFERENCE ON STERILIZATION

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Strasbourg, September 11, 2003: Soraya Post, the President of the International Roma Women's Network, today warned European governments that Roma women across the continent are in the grip of a "terrible health crisis," and that governments must enforce their own laws if there is to be any change.

Mrs. Post was addressing the opening session of a 2-day conference on Roma women's health at the Council of Europe, which has been called to review a report drawn from research in 15 countries.

She said that the report, 'Breaking the Barriers,' had confirmed what Roma women had known for years: "Roma women can expect to die almost twenty years earlier than non-Roma women, and sick Roma are turned away from clinics and hospitals. From East to West, the story is the same. Our people are denied access to health care."

In her statement, Mrs. Post also expressed shock that Roma women are still subject to forcible sterilization in Europe, and called for a special meeting on sterilization and reproductive rights.

Mrs. Post's principal message was that Roma women will only see their lives improve when they take matters into their own hands, and when European governments live up to their legal responsibilities.

"You have drafted laws against discrimination, laws that protect minorities and laws that respect our cultural identity," she said, in a direct appeal to governments. "Yet these laws are often not enforced. They do nothing for millions of Roma women. Many governments do not even collect (health) information on the basis of ethnicity and gender."

Mrs. Post appeared on the panel, and later at a press conference, with the Deputy Secretary-General of the Council of Europe and Simone Veil, a prominent figure in the European women's movement who has twice served as France's Minister of Health. Mrs. Veil survived the death camps of World War 2 and she recalled seeing entire gypsy families before they were taken off to the gas chambers.

Mrs. Post's appearance at the meeting, alongside such company, reflects growing interest in the IRWN, which was established on March 8 by Roma women activists from 18 European countries with help from the Advocacy Project.

It also begins to address one of the themes of the conference - that Roma women are their own best advocates. As Mrs. Post put it: "We have a lot to offer. We know our own problems and our communities better than anyone. A whole new generation of young Roma women give us energy and hope for the future."

The IRWN is the first international network that brings together women from East and West Europe. Mrs. Post told the meeting today that the IRWN's goals are to allow Roma women to speak with one voice at the international level, and to intervene when a member faces a crisis. But she also made it clear that the IRWN has no wish to compete with other networks, and wholeheartedly supports "any initiative aimed at bettering the lives of Roma women." She singled out the Open Society Institute, for working "tirelessly to empower our people."

Mrs. Post herself is a prominent leader of the Sinti community in Sweden, as well as a businesswoman and mother of four children. In an emotional moment, she told the meeting that her own mother had been forcibly sterilized in 1959. While forcible sterilization has long ceased in Sweden, she said, the practice lives on elsewhere in Europe. The Center for Reproductive Rights caused a stir earlier this year when it documented 110 cases of forcible sterilization in the Slovak Republic.

Sterilization is an extreme example of the abuse that lies at the heart of the Roma health crisis, yet it has been treated with extreme caution by intergovernmental bodies like the Council of Europe. As a result, a growing number of Roma advocates are calling for a special conference that would focus on sterilization and seek compensation for victims.

This has been endorsed by the IRWN, which issued an open letter after the disclosures about Slovakia earlier in the year.

- \* For the text of Soraya Post's address to the Strasbourg conference visit:
- \* For the IRWN Charter visit:
- \* For a report on the campaign by young Roma women in Macedonia against demeaning sexual practices visit:
- \* For the report on sterilization in Slovakia by the Center for Reproductive Rights, visit [www.reproductiverights.org](http://www.reproductiverights.org)

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