

THE INTERNATIONAL ROMA WOMEN'S NETWORK IS LAUNCHED

AdvocacyNet

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First Open Letter Criticises Forced Sterilisation in Slovakia

Goteborg (Sweden) - March 8, 2003. Roma women from 18 European countries have launched a new network, the International Roma Women's Network (IRWN), to lobby governments for better living conditions and to fight for Roma women's rights.

In its first public action, the new network has issued an open letter protesting against recent reports that Roma women have been forcibly sterilised in Slovakia. The letter also claims that Slovak policemen have "intimidated" Roma women in the investigation.

The IRWN brings together women activists representing Roma, Sinti, Gypsies, and Travellers from West, Central and Eastern Europe, and is believed to be the first network of its kind. It has been launched on the occasion of International Women's Day (March 8) to symbolise the determination of Roma women throughout Europe to work together.

The decision to create the network was taken at a meeting in Vienna (November 28-29, 2002) to review the health of Roma women in Europe. The meeting was jointly sponsored by the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union's Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC). The three organizations will sponsor a Ministerial conference on the health of Roma women in May.

The new network was then endorsed by a follow-up meeting at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg (February 3-3, 2003), where participants adopted a charter and elected a provisional coordinating committee. The President of the new network, Soraya Post, is a prominent member of Sweden's Sinti population. Other members on the committee come from Bulgaria and Macedonia.

The Strasbourg meeting also agreed that the network will be independent of governments and international agencies.

Europe's population of Roma, Sinti, Gypsies and Travellers number approximately 8 million, and their treatment has become a key issue in the enlargement of the European Union. Several East Europe countries have been told to improve the condition of Roma as a precondition for entry to the EU.

In spite of this, little attention has yet been paid to the specific problems of Roma women, and participants in Vienna and Strasbourg said that this was the principal reason for forming the new network. Put simply, European Roma women need to find their voice.

The network has also been given a boost by growing concern about the poor health of Roma women - a crisis which transcends Europe's state boundaries. A recent study by the OSCE's High Commissioner for National Minorities found that the life expectancy of Roma women is usually between 10 and 17 years lower for Roma women than for the general population, even in Europe's more developed countries like Ireland. Infant mortality among Bulgaria's Roma in 1989 was six times the national average.

The causes of this health crisis range from poverty to poor housing, but they are exacerbated by social exclusion, discrimination, and raw prejudice. Participants at the Vienna and Strasbourg meetings said that this even extends to health facilities, and that sick Roma women and children are often turned away from clinics.

As a result, one of the seven goals in the IRWN's new charter is: "To challenge individual and institutional discrimination at all levels, more specifically discrimination in housing, health care, education and employment."

The immediate task of the IRWN will be to present a unified position at the May Ministerial conference on Roma women's health. Forced sterilisation is likely to be high on the agenda following recent reports that Roma women have been forcibly sterilised in the Slovak Republic. The IRWN open letter calls on the government of Slovakia to "punish the perpetrators" and declares such violations as a "crime against humanity, a crime against all women."

The IRWN members may also take advantage of the May conference to re-elect their committee (which is at present informal) and decide on a procedure for electing new members. The IRWN has taken pains to stress that the network is not seeking to represent all of Europe's Roma women, but only those who wish to join.

- For more information about the IRWN, e-mail the President, [Soraya Post](#).
- Read '[Body and Soul](#),' a recent report by the Center for Reproductive Rights that exposes the use of forced sterilisation against Roma women in Slovakia.
- Contact the Advocacy Project at dcoffice@advocacynet.org.