

AP'S INNOVATIVE USE OF IT PROFILED IN PROMINENT ONLINE PUBLICATIONS

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AP's summer intern program features in a July 11 article in *Wired.com*. Headlined 'Bloggers Opening Western Eyes', it highlights how AP interns are using online diaries (also known as blogs) to describe day to day life in the countries where they are working, and raise awareness about their projects. The article focuses on the work of Marta Schaaf and her host organization, Bosfam, which is supporting women from Srebrenica in Bosnia. It also includes interviews with AP interns in Lebanon and Nigeria.

To read the article [click here](#).

AP's Roma Information Project (RIP) is featured prominently in a recent article in *Transitions Online*. The author highlighted the work of several RIP eRiders and several women's organizations supported by RIP. The eRiders provide technical and information support to Roma civil society organizations in Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Macedonia. RIP is managed by The Advocacy Project and funded by the Open Society Institute - Information Program, Roma Participation Program and Network Women's Program.

To read the article [click here](#).

Bloggers Opening Western Eyes (Wired.com)

After a full day of weaving carpets, a group of Bosnian women gather for a coffee break. They crowd around a table -- sometimes crying, sometimes giggling like young girls -- and read each other's fortunes in the patterns of dregs in their cups.

To some Americans, a coffee break might seem like a trivial event, but to these women it serves as a kind of informal support group. Many are missing sons or husbands presumed to be among the 7,000 Muslim men killed by the Bosnian Serb army in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, considered the worst mass killing since World War II.

Graduate student Marta Schaaf captures the scene in a weblog that chronicles her summer spent working with Bosfam, an advocacy organization that provides support to displaced women and refugees in Bosnia.

Bosfam offers assistance to about 300 women. Most are between 40 and 60 and have little formal education. The organization pays the women to weave rugs and knit clothing and provides space for them to meet.

The group is 'helping them to reconceptualize their role in the family and in society,' Schaaf says. 'In many cases they have lost that role as wives or mothers.'

Many of these women spend the bulk of their time wondering where their sons are and where their next meal is coming from.

'There are women crying almost every day,' she says.

Schaaf is one of eight summer interns affiliated with the Advocacy Project, a nonprofit organization in Washington that works with Non-Government Organizations, or NGOs, around the world.

Each intern, who assists advocacy groups in Bosnia, Nepal, Lebanon, Israel, Kosovo, Italy, Nigeria and the Czech Republic, has her own weblog.

The Advocacy Project is using the blogs to raise awareness about its work and to present an inside look at its projects.

'These blogs can provide a picture of what the tragedies that westerners see on the news mean to the people who live here,' Schaaf says. 'Bosnia isn't something that people talk about anymore, but there is still a lot of work to be done.'

Unlike most weblogs, which include updated links to sites from points all over the Web, the interns' blogs function mainly as journals of their experiences and a window into the lives of the people with whom they are working.

While Schaaf writes about her experiences with the Bosnian women, her fellow interns are posting accounts of their work on the prevention of illegal trafficking of women and children in Nigeria, advocating for Roma (gypsies) in the Czech Republic, and social justice in Nepal.

A popular topic on the blogs is the wonder -- and sometimes the shock -- of living in a culture very different from their own.

Courtney Radsch, an intern at the Middle East Reporter and the Daily Star in Lebanon, writes that she was surprised to be unable to log on to Hotmail during a trip to Syria, finding the word 'forbidden' on her screen.

Erica Williams, an African-American interning in Nigeria writes about her strange 'mind trip' when she discovers that some Nigerians consider her to be white:

'I didn't realize that I would be called Oyinbo by bus conductors, taxi drivers, drummers at parties and passersby,' she writes. 'I didn't foresee that children would stare and point at me or that a teenage girl would ask my host sister, 'Why don't you take her in a taxi? White people's legs aren't made for walking.'"

The Advocacy Project saw a spike in traffic when it first posted the blogs, and the project's section where they are posted is the most popular area of the site, according to Teresa Crawford, technical director for the organization, who spearheaded the idea.

The blogs 'make the projects a lot more accessible,' says Richard Blane, intern coordinator for the Advocacy Project.

'A lot of time this information gets contained within the organization that the intern is working for,' he says. 'It may be that the information gets tied up in a report that only a few people read and it comes out two months after the project is finished.'

Weblogs are an excellent tool for nonprofit organizations, according to Ross Mayfield, CEO of Socialtext, which makes Web publishing tools for groups.

'Weblogs are the cheapest way for an individual or organization to communicate,' he says. 'It's a more natural, human voice than what someone could generate with a press release.'

Mayfield says blogs can also help nonprofits keep their donor base and supporters updated. Plus, 'there's a wide body of fairly influential and growing body of (weblog) readers that pay attention on a regular basis.'

Breaking the Double Chain (Transitions Online)

One of the biggest-ever gatherings of Romani women highlights their path toward empowerment using everything from microchips to microcredits.

by Judit Szakacs

BUDAPEST, Hungary--Maria Vamosine Palmai knows the life of women in traditional Romani communities. As a girl of Lovari and Kalderash background, she dropped out of school at the age of 14 to marry and devote her life to her new family. Now, at 23, she is the mother of three children.

An encounter with Macedonian Romani activist Enisa Eminova proved decisive. Eminova inspired Maria and 15 other Hungarian Romani women to try to take greater control of their own fates. In May 2002 they formed ARANJ, the Organization for Romani Women's Rights, in their hometown of Pecs in southwestern Hungary.

Palmai spoke about her experiences at the Romani women's forum organized as a prelude to a conference on 'Roma in an Expanding Europe,' which brought regional leaders and international agencies together in Budapest on 30 June and 1 July to launch a decade-long Romani integration program.

ARANJ is one of the few organizations run not only for but by traditional Romani women, Palmai says: 'We Romani women did it, though none of us has had much schooling.' Maria and company discovered what Macedonian activist Azbija Memedova has argued: that Romani women must break through multiple barriers to become active participants in their own communities. ARANJ members had to overcome the prejudices not only of the majority society, but also of their own families, who would often prefer them to stay at home and look after the children instead of getting involved in community activities.

Even when the family is or becomes supportive, these women still have to face patriarchal traditions. The pressures not to challenge traditional sexual roles led several women to discontinue their work with the organization, Palmai told TOL. Even those who have managed to remain active must often limit their participation, she said. 'Often, we are invited to conferences but I'm the only one able to go, because the others have to stay home with the kids.'

Nicoleta Bitu, a consultant to the nonprofit Roma rights organization Romani Criss in Romania, said in her presentation to the forum that public and private initiatives tend to focus on the Roma as a whole and have not surveyed the specific problems facing Romani women. Although the forum addressed several different topics, from education, economic empowerment, and health issues to political challenges, the 'double disadvantage' of being both Romani and a woman served as an underlying theme and a common link between all of them.

The double disadvantage has posed important questions for both feminist and Romani activists. As Bitu put it, women's rights movements have tended to look at Romani women as Roma, not women, while Romani movements, usually run by men, have feared that the empowerment of Romani women could damage traditional Romani culture.

Now, however, as a result of conferences on Romani women's rights, leadership training for Romani women, and other initiatives, a new generation of Romani women leaders has grown up, claimed Memedova, who is coordinator of the Roma Center in Skopje, Macedonia.

TRADITION OR DISCRIMINATION?

One of these new-generation leaders is Maria Metodieva of the Roma Information Project (RIP) in Bulgaria. The 24-year-old, English-speaking Metodieva is an eRider, one of seven Romani IT experts who cruise Eastern Europe, helping Romani NGOs upgrade software and hardware, create databases and websites, and navigate the Web.

The eRider network, founded by the Washington, D.C.-based NGO Advocacy Project, started out with all women, but they soon decided to add some techie guys, Metodieva said. Thus, the five women eRiders were joined by two men, one of whom is an engineer, who are also Roma, and are happy that Romani women want to take on technology.

The oppression of Romani women in their own community, the barriers that keep them from being involved in decision-making, was a key issue at the conference. As Memedova put it, Romani women's position of being prevented from making crucial life choices 'is not recognized as discrimination but as tradition.'

Again and again, debate at the forum returned to two themes: education and economic empowerment.

Study after study has shown that the Roma in general have lower education attainment than non-Roma across Central and Eastern Europe. But many forum participants contended that the situation of Romani girls is far worse than that of boys.

Zaklina Durmis, president of the Organization for Youth and Children in Macedonia, told the audience that while Romani girls tend to perform better than Romani boys in the first years of elementary school, they start to drop out around fourth grade in order to get married. Since she believes that keeping these girls in school requires role models other than the ones provided by their families, she recommended state support for Romani women to study pedagogy and to become teachers or teaching assistants.

The importance of positive role models was also emphasized by Kalinka Vasileva, executive director of the Equal Access Foundation of Bulgaria. Speaking of desegregation efforts in her home country, Vasileva claimed that more than 1,600 Romani children from segregated neighborhoods now study in mainstream schools thanks to the work of several NGOs. She sees this as a way out of the apathetic 'ghetto culture' in which these girls and boys are brought up.

Small cash loans, or microcredits, could offer another escape route from the double disadvantage syndrome, several forum participants said. Small loan programs are under way not only in impoverished parts of Eastern and Southeastern Europe but even in France, according to Maria Nowak, president of that country's Association pour le Droit a l'Initiative Economique (ADIE). She told the forum about World Bank-financed microcredits in Bosnia and Albania, and said that in France about 10 percent of microcredit recipients are Roma.

Supporting income-generating activities is a good way to increase opportunities for Romani women, Nowak said. 'Microcredit operations to support self-employment might be a good way to break the vicious circle of dependency. Self-employment traditionally fits the Roma.'

Many participants agreed that early marriages present one of the major obstacles for Romani girls in continuing their education and moving toward greater empowerment. Dimitrina Petrova, executive director of the Budapest-based European Roma Rights Center, emphasized the importance of the human rights approach to this issue. In her view, folkloristic, preservationist attitudes are just as bad as social engineering. The main advantage of the human rights approach is that, relying on dignity, it offers an informed choice for these women.

Marriage customs were at the heart of the first project carried out by ARANJ: a survey conducted in traditional Roma communities across Hungary on the virginity cult, a still widespread tradition requiring Romani girls to remain sexually inexperienced until their wedding nights. ARANJ would like to start clubs for girls from fifth grade up, to motivate them, to tell them not to drop out of school, not to marry so early, to show them that there is another way,' Maria Vamosine Palmai told TOL.

It is not enough simply to provide women with information, Petrova insisted.

'Simply introducing knowledge is not enough, for knowledge is a weak counterbalance to lived tradition. [We need to] present alternatives, using positive examples,' she said in her presentation. She told the story of Elena, a poor Russian Romani woman who worked as a fortuneteller by day and secretly pored over law textbooks at night, without her husband's knowledge. Though she had only four years of formal education, Elena became a human rights

activist in her community; yet not even with Petrova's support was she able to continue her studies.

THE STIGMA OF SEX

Many Romani communities, particularly the less assimilated ones, place a strong emphasis on the tradition of girls remaining virgins until their wedding night. Hungarian sociologist Ibolya Bokor argues that for the Roma, virginity is still a highly symbolic condition, 'a taboo...linked to Romani matrimony.' A virgin bride brings prestige both to her family and the groom's, while a bride who the community suspects of already having lost her virginity is a carrier of shame, she wrote in the analysis of a Hungarian research project on the Romani virginity cult.

Starting in 2001, surveys of Romani sexual taboos and virginity were carried out in Macedonia, Hungary, and Serbia in collaboration with the Advocacy Project, the Open Society Institute, and local Romani women's groups. Researchers found that while traditions differ slightly from community to community, most Romani equate virginity with virtuousness. In Macedonia, Romani girls often undergo a humiliating ritual on their wedding night, when the celebration is only allowed to continue if the couple produces a blood-stained sheet from their marital bed.

In Hungary, the survey conducted by ARANJ found that girls may be taken to a physician by the groom's parents for a vaginal examination at the beginning of the engagement process, well before any commitment is made. If the doctor decides the girl is not a virgin, she and her family face stigmatization, with no 'respectable' boy daring to propose to her.

A bride in Macedonia who is suspected of being sexually active before marriage risks seeing her wedding annulled and being disowned by her family and the entire community. In Hungary, if she turns out to have lost her virginity between the engagement and the wedding night, she may be sent back to her parents, who must then return the dowry paid by the groom's family.

These traditions are alive today in many communities. The Hungarian survey, which analyzed data from 320 questionnaires, found that while four in five boys participating in the survey believed that gaining sexual experience before marriage was fine for them, a third would prefer to marry a virgin, and nearly 25 percent said they might reject the bride if she was not a virgin. Hungarian Romani girls appear to be aware of this: Only 44 percent thought their potential future husbands would accept them if they were sexually experienced before marriage.

In this respect, the Macedonian Roma seem to be even more conservative. Research using the data provided by 660 respondents found that three-quarters of boys wanted a virgin wife and 42 percent would reject a non-virgin bride. Just 1 percent of girls said their future husbands would accept them even if not virgins. Nearly a third thought they were sure to be rejected in such a case; the remainder were unsure of their future husbands' attitudes.

One paradoxical finding, contrasting the data on present practices, was that Macedonian Roma seem more willing than their Central European cousins to bend tradition in accordance with modern ways. A majority of those questioned said the virginity cult should not be sustained: 64 percent of boys, 81 percent of girls, and 54 percent of parents.

Asked the same question, Hungarian Roma seemed more conservative. Two-thirds of the parents and roughly half of the young people, girls and boys alike, said they would prefer to see the custom upheld.