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ROMA WOMEN ADVOCATES DENOUNCE 'RACIST' ROMA BEAUTY PAGEANT

July 26, 2007, Washington, DC: Advocates for Roma women in Europe are demanding the cancellation of the forthcoming Miss Roma International 2007 beauty pageant in Macedonia, on the grounds that it will promote a "racist" image of beauty and undermine the confidence of Roma women as they struggle to combat poverty and prejudice.

The pageant is organized each year by TV BTR Nacional, a Roma TV station in Skopje, Macedonia, and is scheduled to take place on August 25. The station has invited applications from Roma women and girls from the age of 16 and asks that applicants weigh less than 121 pounds (55 kilos).

Promotional literature encourages applicants "not to be shy, but to show your beauty to the world" and describes the pageant as an "excellent opportunity to present Roma traditions and customs."

This is strongly disputed by two advocacy groups, the Roma Women Network from Serbia and the International Roma Women's Network (IRWN). IRWN brings together Roma women advocates from 18 European countries and is a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP).

Writing from Sweden, Soraya Post, the President of IRWN, denounced the pageant in an open letter released on Tuesday: "We are extremely disgusted that the organizer dares to present this event as an act which contributes to the emancipation of Romani women. Beauty contests are nothing but the perpetration...of a centuries-old history where women are at the sole service of men."

A recent press release from the Roma Women Network from Serbia warns that the pageant will encourage the perception that beautiful women are "young, thin, tall" and also white. The group describes this "sole concept of beauty" as racist, sexist and a "social construct" that is "artificially produced from modern industries and developed countries to make profit." Imposing it on Roma women, says the group, encourages women to look up to a "dominant culture."

Similar criticism has often been leveled at beauty pageants by feminists, but it has special significance for the Roma, who live across Europe. Advocates argue that this cultural diversity must be encouraged, not undermined, if Roma women are to gain in confidence and challenge poverty. According to the Serbian group, Roma women have the shortest life span in Europe and account for 80 percent of adult illiteracy among Europe's Roma.

Mr Zoran Dimov, the pageant organizer, declined to respond to an inquiry from AP.

Meanwhile, the disempowerment of Roma is graphically illustrated in a recent blog by Stephanie

Gilbert, an AP Peace Fellow from Georgetown University, who is volunteering this summer with the Association for the Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women (ESE) in Macedonia.

Ms Gilbert describes the poverty and prejudice that afflicts Roma in Skopje, where the beauty pageant will be held: "In Skopje, every evening half-naked Roma children wander the main square while their mothers dig in garbage dumpsters for food. Sometimes it's the children digging in the garbage. Some of the older kids, probably nine or 10, but looking much younger due to malnourishment, beg or try to sell cigarettes and gum for a few cents."

ESE is working to empower Roma through a three-year program to improve and increase access to health care. Researchers will spend a year gathering data about the quality, access and availability of health services and insurance for Roma, particularly Roma women. ESE is also researching the attitudes of health care professionals toward Roma.

- To contact IRWN, email [Janette Grönfors](#).
- To protest against the pageant, email [Zoran Dimov](#).
- Read [Stephanie Gilbert's blog](#) on Roma in Skopje.
- Visit [ESE](#)