

**EUROPEAN ROMA AND TRAVELLERS FORUM &
INTERNATIONAL ROMA WOMEN'S NETWORK**

POSITION PAPER ON THE
**4TH INTERNATIONAL
ROMA WOMEN'S
CONFERENCE**

**“ACTING NOW FOR AN
EQUAL FUTURE”**



On the occasion of the 4th International Conference of Roma Women the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF) and the International Roma Women Network (IRWN) would like to manifest our deep interest in the success of this conference and to encourage all Roma women to work together for the improvement of their status in society and for the welfare of their communities.

The Roma communities in Europe are going through difficult times. Discrimination and marginalization are increasing and living conditions are constantly deteriorating. Roma women have a major role to play in combating these humiliating conditions, not only as Roma but also as women.

Roma women need to take stock of their status and condition in life and be prepared to play a role in bringing changes within and outside their communities. The tradition in some Roma groups of keeping girls at home, away from school for housework should be tackled too.

We believe that lack of education is a major obstacle to improvement for any community. Women as mothers have to be in the forefront in mobilising forces in favour of the education of their children, both boys and girls.

Up to 60 years ago it was common throughout Europe to destine girls for housework. Education was considered a luxury. This way of thinking has fortunately changed but continues to persist in some Roma communities.

It is for you/(us) Roma women to help bring change. Both girls and boys need to receive primary and secondary education and, whenever possible, university education. An educated Roma community is sheltered from marginalisation and poverty and can play its role in society.

Moreover, an educated Roma community will be in a better position to preserve its cultural heritage, to transmit traditions and reinforce the sense of Roma identity.

One obstacle to education is early marriages. Here again it is not so long ago that this practice disappeared in Europe but not among some Roma groups. The Roma communities are aware of the inconveniences of early marriages, and therefore the process needs to be accelerated: it hinders a proper education; it is harmful to health and destroys the girls' future.

Most of all Roma women must become active participants in their community: they must act as the partners of men. The ERTF attaches great importance to gender equality and strives to have equality in its structures.

Women's participation in decision-making within the family and the community is enrichment to the community and we appeal not only to Roma women but also to Roma men to share decisions with them.

Throughout the world, women are vital economic players. Hundreds of millions of women are undertaking critical roles in industry, agriculture, manufacturing, and services.

In every country, women face the particular challenges of their national context, especially in developing economies.

Last year, at the 2012 ERTF Plenary assembly it was agreed among the member organisations and Roma women representation that we wanted to focus on tangible actions that will increase and improve economic opportunities for Roma women, especially in developing countries.

This 4th international Roma women's conference "acting now for an equal future" should seize the momentum and propose concrete steps and actions that will help Roma women expand their businesses, get access to credit and financing, and protect themselves and their businesses from exploitation. By sharing experiences and ideas during this conference, "we can accelerate the progress being made by transforming words into action."

An integrated approach is needed to address the heightened challenges facing Roma women in rural areas. Specific concerns include greater distances and time constraints, as well as reduced access to public services like water, energy, education, information, and health care. They also have trouble gaining access to markets, both physically and socially. Due to lack of intellectual property rights, their products and knowledge are often not recognized and they disappear in the value chain. Registering and valuing their inputs would contribute to Roma women's economic empowerment.

We call upon the member states of the Council of Europe, the European Union, the OSCE, United Nations and other international organisations to recognise and support the important role of Roma women's groups and organizations working at the forefront of challenging traditional practices that are considered being contradictory to fundamental human rights norms, standards and principles.

It's the right time for institutions, media and society to support the contribution of educated Romani women in breaking down the deeply rooted stereotypes. For many centuries we have been witnessing how these stereotypes harm Roma communities and put hundreds of Roma lives in danger. The states must take urgent actions in reinforcing the legal protection in combating racist environment in schools against Roma students.

We also call upon business companies, institutions, political parties, media and international organisations to support Roma women efforts for employment and education.

We urge the Council of Europe, the European Commission, United Nations, the OSCE and other international organisations to join with the Roma women non-governmental organizations, civil society and funding sources to work towards a European Roma Women Strategy.

The creation and implementation of such strategic document will not happen until Roma women empower themselves with the support of men, institutions and governments.

A European Roma Women strategy under Council of Europe and European Commission auspices would raise consciousness and mobilise networks and circles of Roma and non-Roma women at every level of society and across Europe.

A precondition for the strategy to be implemented beside financial support is building up a political will. Therefore the ERTF & IRWN are calling upon the Roma women organisations/networks to commit themselves in promotion and lobby for the implementation of the strategy and to create a lobby group of well-known Roma and non-Roma personalities to support this process. This lobby group would also energise a global women's movement, which is necessary to create the political will needed to bring about gender equality.

Having established a European Roma women strategy should not be used as an excuse for the member states not to implement the international standards/legislation to which they are already committed.

the importance of supporting and funding Roma women's organizations and networks is a key in advancing Roma women's empowerment. It is essential for women to feel any power over their lives, and empowerment is the basis for building women's leadership.