

*Let's Think About Roma Women*

As my wife would tell you, being a woman is difficult mainly because you have to spend your life dealing with men. On International Roma Day, in this beautiful and prosperous country, we might want to reflect on this. As we celebrate Roma culture and history, and consider yet again the challenge of Roma integration, we should use this opportunity to honor Roma women. They are one of Slovenia's great untapped resources. I am reminded of the observation of the American historian Will Durant, that throughout the history of civilization women have played one crucial role: to civilize men!

I'm not a Roma woman and I'm not an expert. But I have, along with U.S. Embassy colleagues, taken time to visit some Roma communities in Slovenia. I have seen living conditions there and I have talked to people who live there. I have a daughter of my own, and I think it's daunting even to imagine growing up as a girl under such conditions. This experience is why the U.S. Embassy here wants to raise awareness of Roma women's lives, and why we're dedicating our outreach this year to them.

Roma communities already endure poverty, violence, unemployment, poor health care, and discrimination. On top of that, Roma women take care of the household and the children, just as many women do. They often bear children very early in life, before they have a chance to get much education. As it is for women everywhere, their communities – both Roma communities and outsiders – often don't give them a voice. Their burdens are heavy and their options are limited.

It's difficult to face discrimination because you're Roma, but imagine the double discrimination that comes with being Roma and a woman. Maybe the experience of Roma women is the origin of the Roma saying, "Bury me standing—I've been on my knees my whole life."

But a woman on her knees her whole life still knows this: When she's allowed to stand up, things get better – for everyone. There is a direct connection, for instance, between how much

education a woman has, and how healthy she and her family are. Education also helps women to escape poverty: for every extra year a girl goes to school, she increases her lifetime income by 15%. In India, women-led villages invest more in drinking water and infrastructure, and have higher rates of childhood immunizations, lower gender gaps in school attendance, and less corruption. When women vote, hold office, and participate in politics, they help other women. Jana Rošer of the Roma Council is a great example, someone who represents a huge step forward, focusing on Roma women's issues.

And women help men, too. A mountain of research shows that peaceful, prosperous, stable countries do not *produce* greater gender equality, but that raising up the status of women actually *makes* countries peaceful, prosperous, and stable. When women in war zones help make the peace, the peace lasts. When women take part in negotiations, change is lasting. Women raise issues that help societies reconcile and rebuild. We have seen this happen in troubled places like Sudan, Congo, Uganda, Afghanistan, and Northern Ireland. Women often speak up on behalf of marginalized groups, and they organize across cultural and ethnic divides. When they do that, more people have a voice, and the result is stability and peace.

Imagine Roma women organizing across the significant ethnic divide that faces their own community. Imagine their voices as part of the conversation.

The empowerment of women is not just the right and generous thing to do, but it is also the wise thing to do. When women make progress, countries make progress. When Roma women make progress, Roma people make progress. And Slovenia makes progress. The U.S. Embassy is proud to be part of this, and that's why we give grants to Roma organizations and we give exchange-program slots in the United States to Roma candidates.

That's what everyone wants for Slovenia's Roma—peace, stability, and integration. And perhaps it's time to consider how Roma women can play a role in their own progress. They can do it.

The problems in the Roma community need women's talents, experiences, and leadership. And their voices.

Today we celebrate the culture and heritage of Roma, and today I honor Roma women. They are an inspiration to all of us at the U.S. Embassy.