

Women

Gender and culture specificity entails bearing in mind those issues which diminish opportunities for Roma women vis-à-vis Roma men and the society at large. These are the guarantees which a society should put in place to address specific problems in the understanding that the point of departure is not the same for all women and therefore the route to be followed can and should be different.

Roma women, considered as an ethnic group forming part of the Spanish society, face a different situation with respect to the majority being affected by three factors: for being women in a patriarchal society, for belonging to an ethnic minority which is the one most negatively viewed by mainstream society and for belonging to a culture which considers women almost exclusively as mothers and wives thus limiting their possibility for advancement.

Roma women are aware that society today requires us to redefine Roma identity and culture

involving a process of blending tradition and modernity, and those managing to achieve this serve as examples for other Roma women who also want to broaden their horizons without renouncing their culture.

Continued support for these efforts to help overcome obstacles related with the triple discrimination for reason of gender and ethnic group should be one of the principal objectives of the actions targeting Roma women and should focus on recognition mechanisms, the re-thinking of imposed behavioural patterns and tools to establish their identity as women and as Roma.

Although great progress has been made over the last several years, Roma women still have hurdles to overcome in terms of access to employment, education, social and political participation and entertainment and free-time activities. Many of these barriers are the result of stereotypes and prejudice which hinder further education for



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young Roma girls, the hiring of women in the labour market and the development of equal relations.

Since its commencement and in response to the aims of the organisation, the FSG's Women's Area has implemented awareness-raising and training actions and has facilitated access to employment, accompaniment and professional mediation between Roma women and social and health institutions and resources and has promoted social participation, research and technical assistance for professional teams.

The priorities of the Area of Women are based on the needs identified in this intercultural participatory process where the focus is on Roma women. This allows us to address lines of work which include the specific objectives we have set.

These lines focus on work for and with the Roma community, government administrations, professional teams and the majority society as agents responsible for setting the stage for co-existence in conditions of equality:

- › Incorporate the gender perspective transversally in all of the organisation's work areas and programmes to address the specific needs of Roma women in all facets of participation.
- › Promote networking among Roma women and intercultural networking and work to analyse and overcome obstacles standing in the way of this process. Create and enhance contact and networking among women as a necessary step towards empowerment, awareness raising and mutual support to make headway down the path towards equal opportunity.
- › Work from the intercultural perspective so that references to Roma women are found in every

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equal opportunity programme, encouraging intercultural mediation and supporting the training and capacity-building of Roma women.

- › Raise the awareness of the different government administrations responsible for equal opportunity plans and programmes as to the needs of Roma women.
- › Promote access to equal opportunity resources for Roma women.
- › Encourage the implementation of specific programmes where the participation of Roma women is envisaged as a learning process. Include Roma women as the priority beneficiaries in calls for proposals for programmes focusing on eliminating the social obstacles they face as women and as Roma.
- › Foster a positive image of Roma women with a view to contributing to the elimination of negative stereotypes in the media and in society in general.
- › Contribute to Roma women's access to ITCs (Information Technology and Communication) and the information society with a view to enhancing their employability and social participation.

- › Promote the reconciliation of family and professional life among Roma women.
- › Facilitate the access of Roma women to general and specific resources and services for women and understanding between them and professional service providers.
- › Provide technical assistance in response to requests from government administrations and health and social services professionals and those dealing with victims of gender based violence to help tailor their measures to the reality of Roma women.

In planning and implementing activities developed targeting the advancement of Roma women, the FSG's Women's Area has put a priority on the active participation of Roma women not only in the implementation of activities but also in the design and evaluation of actions. To that end their proposals are collected and their involvement in the organisation of different activities is fostered.

The **Roma Women's Group** (Spanish acronym **GMG**) has been forged and consolidated over the last several years and now in 2008 has 23 members. This is a heterogeneous group formed by Roma professionals of different ages, levels of training and styles of expressing their identity as Roma women. What all of these women have in common is their determination and interest in improving the condition of all Roma women both within and outside of their community by seeking the strategies considered most suitable and giving rise to different profiles which are complementary and mutually enriching. We are witnessing a very strong shift in the situation and role of Roma women. The GMG is a forum for meeting, debate and participation where members mutually support one another in the arduous task of bringing about change and overcoming



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resistance from the majority society and the Roma community to the change processes being initiated.

In 2007, specific actions were implemented focusing on Roma women, but a priority was also placed on the implementation of transversal inclusion strategies incorporating the gender perspective into the FSG's different areas of work. The main areas of action have been:

- › **Formal education and personal development.** Adult education workshops and basic training and personal development initiatives in the different territories have provided a forum for meeting and reflection for women where they can enhance their interpersonal skills and raise self-esteem while also working on reading, writing and other basic subjects. Also, advantage has been taken of the school support programmes to encourage young Roma girls to stay in school. We would stress the importance and success of the pilot programme *Romi.net* which since 2006, funded through the Avanza Plan of the Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Trade, encourages access to new technologies for Roma women through IT classrooms coordinated by a group of Roma empowerers (women) who received specific training in this connection from the Esplai Foundation.



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- › **Combining labour, family and personal responsibilities.** In our quest to support Roma women's access to employment, it is both necessary and vital to implement initiatives which favour the sharing of housework and free them from the burden of playing the role of caretaker and educator within their families. In this context, we employ awareness-raising actions, school enrolment of children, referrals to other specific resources and educational and entertainment activities for minors such as the creation of recreation centres with schedules coinciding with the mother's and father's normal working hours or training activity timetables.
- › **Health promotion.** One of the most important lines of action is the promotion of the health of Roma women who are traditionally occupied with their role as community caretakers but less concerned about taking care of their own health which they view simply as the absence of disease. Workshops and health programmes are organised with a view to addressing the needs of women from a psychosocial perspective and to improve the living standard of other members of the community. Special mention should be made of the programme "Health and Roma Women"

implemented in Leon with funding from the Ebro-Puleva Foundation.


- › **Training, counselling and accompaniment in employment.** Labour market access is one of the barriers which Roma women commonly come up against and in this connection work is being done through the *Acceder* Programme with actions focusing on vocational training and familiarity with mainstream employment resources with a view to enhancing Roma women's scope of opportunities in the labour market.
- › **Individualised attention.** Roma women are a heterogeneous group, meaning that the needs and interests of each of them are also diverse and this is why each one requires individualised attention so that tailored support adapted to each situation can be given. Our teams try to respond to all of these calls for support either with our own means or, as necessary, in coordination with and/or referral to other social entities and resources.
- › **Social participation.** The Foundation embraces social participation networks and is working along these lines with the development and participation of different conferences and seminars organised by the FSG itself and by taking part in those organised by other organisations thus promoting contact, relationships, debate and the social participation of Roma women and greater insight into the current situation which they are undergoing and the effort they are all making to improve it.

Owing to the interest expressed by the large number of participants, mention should be made of the XI State Conference on Roma Women entitled "Another Perspective" organised in collaboration with the Women's Institute serving

as an encounter between 176 women from different Autonomous Communities where debates were held on the new professional profile of Roma women and where the importance of reconciling family and professional life was stressed.

As a result of the Collaboration Agreement signed between the Women's Institute and the FSG the seminar entitled *Health and Roma Women* was held with the participation of more than 50 Roma women workers from our organisation to debate and reflect on health and specifically on the emotional health of Roma women which is generally a taboo topic because it is believed that there is nothing to be done in this connection or because Roma women are simply just too busy taking care of other family business to focus on their own needs.

› **Awareness-raising.** In addition to its own events, the Foundation raises awareness by attending and participating as speakers in events organised by other organisations with a view to familiarising others with the reality of Roma women today and encouraging the elimination of stereotypes. In this connection

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we would draw attention to our participation in the *International Roma Women's Conference* organised by the Women's Panel of the Madrid City Council and our involvement at the Universities of Caceres and Talavera which merits special mention due to the importance of including the issue of women and ethnic minorities in courses given at those universities.

› **Technical support and assistance.** In 2007 the Women's Area responded to 163 requests from public administrations, other social entities, social services centres working with women and private individuals. The majority of these requests had to do with the inclusion of equal opportunity and ethnic minority issues in plans, programmes and projects and also with collaboration and support in different situations related with Roma women. In addition to these requests, we must also include those that are addressed directly through the FSG's different territorial centres.

› **Healthy leisure and culture.** Entertainment and cultural activities provide the ideal setting to promote the creation of and involvement in networks between Roma women and their access to mainstream cultural resources. In this connection, activities such as song and dance workshops (*bulerías*), cultural visits, sports activities, etc. have facilitated transversal work focusing on many other educational aspects.

Materials and publications. As for support materials for work focusing on the holistic advancement of Roma Women, in 2007 the "*Guía de Motivación y recursos. Mujeres Gitanas y Nuevas Tecnologías*" (Roma women and new technologies. Motivation and resources handbook) was compiled as part of the aforementioned 2007 agreement with the Women's Institute.