

## *O be a women and in particular, o be a Roma woman*



When I was a little girl my Sinti grandmother told me about the significance of our Romani culture and our rights, that our cultural identity be recognised and that I should never forget that identity. 'What is a person without their cultural identity', she said. She prepared me for my own family life and I knew what I had to do; tell my children about their Romani heritage so our culture lives on. We have much to be proud of as my ancestors, like my grandmother, were good and peaceful people who took time to care for others, had a deep understanding of nature and knew the meaning of how important the family unit was. In this modern society we're living in now, there is a lot of pressure on mothers to leave their kids and go to work, but for me it's much more important to be there for my kids and work around it, like doing self employed jobs that fit in with my children as I am there for them first and foremost. Not only that, as all my kids live in Australian society, I found it necessary to put up Romani websites with plenty of knowledgeable material about our culture. The thing is, here in Australia, people really don't know what a Romani is and it is my mission to educate them through my websites, my books, Romani exhibits and more.

It has happened that my kid's rights have been ignored because of ignorance and we have had to speak up at schools. In some schools it made a big difference and it was like a burden being lifted when we were understood. 'Hey! We are living here in this multicultural place, there's room for us too', we thought. This is why it is important to speak out about our identity and culture. We have the right to do so, just like any other culture has. We've been through so much pain and suffering through all of our history, discrimination, the holocaust, and continuously persecuted. Then running away to other countries to find some home, to find some place we are welcome. It's been a long road and if we don't stand proud now, in my opinion it might be too late to change things. The timing is vital. It is important to break through the barriers and be counted, so that our children have equal opportunities in society.

If we have a movement of Roma women it will make us stronger and I think it is already happening. A couple of years back, I contributed to the Romani poem book, *Sar O paj, Like Water*. Roma women wrote poems from their heart and it showed that our women have a powerful voice that would be of so much benefit to the Romani cause. Society will get use to Romanies if we make a stance. It just takes a lot of persistence and finding ways to share ideas to get us heard. I take a Romani exhibit and education board to public places, such as very busy markets, twice a month so the public can read it. When an opportunity arises to work with someone who wants to help us, I take it up. This is so important to me.

To speak for our ancestors who could not speak out, often through fear, to carry on the Roma spirit, to undo the wrongs that have been done by the misinformation that has been fed for ages to the ignorant public by the media and entertainment industry, and to help our children live in a place without feeling they have to make themselves invisible is my vision and goal. I'll carry on so we can be free and I would like to see more Roma women participate in that as well.

Yvonne Slee