

REPORT OF THE 3rd GATHERING OF ROMA WOMEN IN GREECE

**RTRANSFORM – Roma Women transforming the educational systems around
Europe through their social and political mobilizations**

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ALTERNATIVE INNOVATIVE DEVELOPMENT | AID.COM.GR LARISA, GREECE

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Introduction

Project: RTtransform - Roma women are transforming education systems across Europe through their social and political mobilization

Responsible Organization for the implementation of Dialogue Meetings in Greece:

Alternative Innovative Development (AID), aid.com.gr

Date of Meeting: November 4, 2023

Start Time: 12:00

Venue: 4th Primary School of Tyrnavos, Tyrnavos, Greece

The meeting of Greek Roma women was held at the 4th Primary School of Tyrnavos on Saturday, November 4, 2023. Sixty (60) participants from various areas of Greece, such as Thessaloniki, Rhodope, Karditsa, Volos, and Tyrnavos, attended the Dialogical Meeting. The women resided in nine different Roma settlements.

The 4th Primary School of Tyrnavos as meeting place held symbolic significance. The school has an environment supportive of Roma children, with 50% of its students being Roma, aiming to support Roma parents and children to enhance their educational experience.

The aim of the nationwide Gathering of Greek Roma Women was for the women and Roma girls to discuss topics related to their education, share experiences, exchange opinions, and express their needs.

The Gathering was initially planned to have local and regional scope. However, due to the increased interest from women across Greece, the organizers reshaped the event to ensure participation from as many remote areas as possible.

Specifically, the 1st Dialogical Meeting had 22 participants from 6 areas in Greece, while the 2nd and 3rd meetings tripled the number of participants (60 individuals) from 9 different Roma communities.

It's important to note that due to weather conditions and professional commitments, an additional 25 participating women from the Katerini and Thessaloniki areas were unable to attend and cancelled the same day or a day earlier.

During the Dialogical Meeting of Roma women, there was an expressed interest from workers in Roma Community Centers (such as educators, social workers, etc.) across Greece to participate. However, priority was given to the participation of groups of Roma women accompanied by Community Center staff.

Warm thanks were extended to the Roma mediators working in Community Centers with Roma Community Centers and their staff who accompanied and participated in the 3rd Dialogical Meeting.

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We specially also thank the European Youth Foundation for the contribution to the 3rd Dialogic Gathering and its strong support to our efforts in terms of the empowerment of women.

Male mediators or community leaders were aware that they would not participate in the plenary sessions and discussions but would remain in the event's external area

Program of the 3rd Roma Women's Gathering in Greece

Greetings

- Welcome and presentation of the results of the Dialogical Meetings and their objectives within the framework of the RTransform project: Papakonstantinou, Fenia
- Welcome and presentation of the program by members of the Organizing Committee of the Dialogical Meetings: Karafyllidou, Eleni, Rapou, Eirini.
- Greetings from the Director of the 4th Primary School of Tyrnavos, Blakou, Theodora.

Stories of Roma women

- "Back to School in Adult Life" - Athena T. - candidate in local elections, Graduate of Vocational School, 26 years old
- "Back to School in Adult Life: Chasing the University Dream" - Irene F. - Cultural Mediator in Roma Community Center of Volos, 45 years old
- "My Decision to Continue Education as a Mother of 3 Children, My Journey Toward Employment, and My Support for 3 Generations of Girls" - Katerina M. - Roma Mediator in Community Center, graduated from school in the age of 39, 52 years old & Katerina K. - Student
- "Fulfilling My Goal to Become a Teacher: Challenges, Sacrifices, and Decisions" - Irene R.
- "My Dilemmas as a Student, Mother, and Working Woman: The Butterfly's Flight" - Georgia K. - Writer, Graduate of University, 34 years old

Expert

- Vasiliki Vatali, Educator & Kyriaki Athanasiou, Employment Counselor - Community Center with Roma Community Center of the Municipality of Ambelokipi-Menemeni –

Presentation on educational choices and employment titled "Work or School? Or perhaps both?"

Working groups

The women were divided into three (3) groups. Two discussion moderators were present in each working group.

Plenary session

In the plenary, the women shared the conclusions from the working groups and a fruitful dialogue took place between them.

Gathering closure and celebration.

Description 3rd Roma women's Gathering in Greece

The Gathering of Greek Roma women took place at the 4th Primary School of Tyrnavos on Saturday, November 4, 2023. Roma women from various regions of Greece, such as Thessaloniki, Larisa, Rodopi, Tyrnavos, Volos, Karditsa, participated and in total they were residing in nine different Roma settlements.

Most participating women were graduates of primary school, and a smaller percentage had attended or were attending secondary education. Four women were university graduates.

Before the Gathering, the women toured the space of the 4th Primary School of Tyrnavos and had the opportunity to get to know each other, exchanging information about the reasons that led them to participate in the meeting and their needs. Throughout their stay, volunteers from AID and members of the Organizing Committee welcomed the women, engaged in discussions, and encouraged the networking of Roma women from different areas.

During the official start of the Gathering, a representative from AID welcomed the participants, explained the project's goals, the significance of participation in educational activities, and highlighted the importance of empowerment workshops conducted before the meeting within the Romni Si Zor project.

Members of the Organizing Committee then introduced themselves, addressing the participants and extending an open invitation for other women to join the committee. They particularly mentioned the inclusion of younger girls who joined after the 2nd Dialogical Meeting.

The Director of the hosting Primary School addressed the Roma community's presence in the area and emphasized the significant progress made by Roma children in the school. They underscored the

value of encouraging these children to pursue their goals and highlighted that 50% of the school's students were Roma. The school, together with parents, consistently works to create a friendly environment for all children.

Subsequently, the speakers, Roma women, shared their life stories, discussing how they achieved their goals. They talked about their motivations, the obstacles they faced, and how they managed to overcome challenges.

Life stories:

- **Athena**, 25 years old, is a graduate of Vocational Training Institutes (IEK). Her family environment was supportive of her education and strongly urged her to complete high school and pursue further studies. Through participation in several programs, she discovered her passion for engaging in community matters and human rights. She completed a culinary program and spoke about the challenges of racism and discrimination she faced during local elections. As a Roma woman, she emphasized the need for community support and encouraged women not to be discouraged by negative comments, stating that mindsets change when one dares to challenge them.
- **Irene F.** was forced to stop schooling as a child. Despite her family's desires, she continued her efforts by copying classmates' notes. At 27, she attended a Second Chance School, obtained her high school diploma, and then attended a Vocational Lyceum. She now holds the title of assistant physiotherapist at the age of 40.
- **Katerina M.** never expected to be at the 3rd Dialogical Meeting of Roma women, let alone to share her own achievements. When young, she believed she wouldn't fulfill her dreams as her parents forbade her to continue school after the 3rd grade to assist the family. Her interest in learning was noticed by her teacher, who advised her parents to allow her to educate herself. Several years later, after raising her own children, she returned to studies, completed school, and now works at the community center. She manages a balanced life, being a working woman with a family. **Katerina K.** is a student and the granddaughter of Katerina M. Inspired by other women in her family, especially her grandmother, she thirsts for knowledge. She's an example of a child who, with proper role models, understands the importance of schooling and personal development in modern society. She is a student at the 3rd Primary School and eagerly anticipates continuing her education in secondary school.
- **Irene R.** got engaged at a very young age and faced pressure to quit school. Despite society's reaction that she'd "ruin her engagement," and with her family's support, she managed to continue her studies. Her parents helped make her educational dream a reality. Through hard work and admirable effort, she took university entrance exams and studied. Today, she is an educator and a mediator at the Community Center in Pavlos Melas, Stavroupoli, Thessaloniki.

- **Georgia K.** loved education from a young age. Despite her mother not attending school and obtaining her primary school diploma at an older age, she encouraged Georgia to continue her education, despite reactions from those around her. She was criticized and targeted because of her choice to pursue higher education. With her mother's support, she ignored negative comments and became a philologist. She's also the author of a fairy tale whose protagonist is a Roma, aiming to raise awareness within the community and society about school dropout rates.

Expert Speech

- After the speeches, the experts Vasiliki Vatali and Kyriaki Athanasiou discussed the combination of education and work. They emphasized that school dropout reasons are often linked to the lack of infrastructure and living conditions. They advocated for state measures and stressed the family's responsibility to send children to school. Encouraging women to choose their own dreams, they presented a brochure detailing educational options and paths at each educational level to the participants. Moreover, they provided information on how to enroll in literacy courses to obtain a Primary School diploma and mentioned the co-location of the Children's Creative Employment Center and the Second Chance School as measures to facilitate women's studies at the Vocational Training Centre

During the second half of the event, the women were divided into three groups. The separation of the groups was planned with the women's registration at the beginning of the Meeting, emphasizing the need to have women from all areas in each group. Two coordinators were assigned to lead discussions in each group.

During the workgroups, the women shared their life stories, concerns, and discussed what they needed to do to fulfill their desires and needs. They encouraged one another and exchanged thoughts on how they deal with challenges while considering what changes they could make for a more prosperous future.

In more detail:

From the discussions, it was evident that the **women acknowledged the value of education and the benefits it offers. A supportive family environment emerged as a significant factor in their educational journey.** The women also emphasized their wish for a better future for their children, which motivates them to continue their education.

"I was greatly impressed when my mother completed her education and obtained her diploma; I felt proud that she not only got the diploma but was also honored by the University."

"My mom, even though she didn't finish school, always supported us to get educated. She told us that without education, we wouldn't get the jobs we wanted, and our lives wouldn't improve."

"My mother initially didn't want me to go to school. However, once I got my diploma, she started supporting me, and now, she's the one encouraging me to continue."

"We, the adults, didn't go to school. However, our children and grandchildren must."

The majority of older women had families at a young age or lacked a supportive family environment, which was a reason for their school dropout.

"Before I got married, I attended school. After that, my mother stopped me, but I wanted to continue."

"I stopped schooling at the 3rd grade. I wanted to continue, but my mother said I had to take care of my younger siblings."

"I got engaged at 14. One day, my mother-in-law came home and told me to stop going to school."

"I got married at 12 and started a family; how could I continue school?"

The situations you've described highlight the multiple challenges and obstacles faced by many Romani women and girls in accessing education, employment, and making personal life choices within their community.

"Closed minds reproduce old ideas. It's difficult at 15-16 or 18-20 if you don't want to marry to do other things; they called me immoral. I wore glasses since I was young and they told me that reading would ruin my eyes."

"I got married at 13. Until then, I went to school, but then my parents stopped me; I had a husband. My brothers, who were boys and unmarried, continued."

"A girl at 16 or 17 is considered an old maid if she hasn't married."

In other discussions, it emerged that **many times the school environment is pivotal in determining the continuation of education for Romani children, acting both as a motivator and an obstacle.**

"My child is being helped at school. They tell me what they are doing, and what I need to correct, and I try to help."

"The teachers helped my child to be good and learn the language. I couldn't, and I am thankful."

"We have good teachers and others. They're not all the same, but they need to help."

It's noteworthy that the women pointed out that language is a significant barrier in relation to school.

"I don't understand Greek. We don't speak it in our community; I need translation."

"I don't feel good because many times I don't understand what they say. They ask me something and I don't know what they say..."

"In hospitals, for instance...you don't understand and don't feel safe... When you don't understand how to communicate properly? I am trying to learn now."

In several instances, Romani women feel judged by the wider community when their choices diverge from the norm.

"A woman going to school after primary school is considered useless... 'What use are letters?' That's what they say."

"When my parents helped me continue school, our neighbors made fun of us; they marginalized us."

"I am 25 years old and because I didn't get married but continued with school, they consider me old, an old maid."

Moreover, **they expressed the difficulties they face and emphasized that actions to support themselves and their children would be beneficial.**

- "We don't know these things. We can't help our children. However, we want to learn to be equal."
- "Someone who knows should come to our houses, tell the children, explain to them, and persuade them to go to school... No matter what we say, we are the same... They need to see other examples and wake up... To see the world outside."

This insight emphasizes the **necessity for educational and social interventions, inclusive programs, and cultural understanding that can offer opportunities and support to Romani women** and their families. The sentiments expressed from the 3rd Dialogue Meeting of Romani Women highlight the **growing awareness and determination among these women to improve their circumstances and their lives:**

"Today I learned a lot. I learned about myself... I want to do more of these meetings because we are all the same, and knowing Roma girls who have done things gives us courage."

They **emphasized facing economic difficulties due to the lack of job opportunities and their desire to pursue education, driven by the goal of professional rehabilitation, personal autonomy, and happiness.**

"Getting married at 12 is not a solution; by 25, she would have become a grandmother. However, if she continues schooling and marries at 20, she will have her family, her degree, her own money, independence, and will contribute to the household."

"A degree helps you find the job you want, live a better life."

"Our tradition and culture are important, but we can't stop going to school. Women need to be educated, leave the house, and work. First for themselves and then for their children."

"When women have to start something on their own, it's difficult for themselves; there are obstacles. These meetings give courage to girls to go to school, learn their rights in work."

"Even for a cleaner, you need a diploma. How will you find a job if you haven't been to school?"

During these conversations, it was **highlighted that they lack access to information on how to continue their education. The prospect of continuing their education at the Second Chance School seemed particularly interesting to them.**

"I didn't know about the Second Chance School; I would like to go. I can leave the children in the morning and go home after school."

They all agreed that, as women, they need to make decisions for themselves with a more assertive presence.

"Women need to take a step, go to school regularly. There's time for family, marriage, and children later. Everything comes at its own time."

"As women, it's also our fault when we listen to the desires of others (family, society, spouse) without doing what we want. Educated women become more independent; they don't wait for their husbands to give them money."

"Women can say no whenever they want."

"I'm moved that a young woman knows she can say no, do what she wants."

"Women should continue because they can; we should continue chasing our dreams and never give up."

The 3rd Gathering of Romani Women concluded with each woman **expressing her personal desires and asking how they can fulfill them. This signifies a strong desire for empowerment, education, and independence among Romani women.**

"They expressed their positive feelings about the event, as they had the opportunity to meet and speak with Romani women who share the same concerns, share their worries, and exchange information."

"It's a gain if at least one woman desires to go to school, whether she's young or old, to seek education."

"It's wonderful to be able to learn something new every day."

"I really liked coming here today, listening to everything, even if I didn't go to school."

"I'm leaving with a sense of optimism."

"I feel like my wings have grown a little more. I met new women who hadn't come last time."

"I met women from other communities and I encourage them to try to educate themselves."

"To change the conditions and situations, we need to change ourselves."

"Events like today's support women, open their minds, and help them continue and make their dreams a reality."

Conclusions for the 3rd Dialogue Meeting of Roma women in Greece

School attendance is a matter of vital importance, particularly when we refer to the Roma women community. In the past, various factors negatively affected their attendance, such as poverty, traditional practices, lack of resources, stereotypes, and racism. However, these same obstacles persist today and vary across different regions. The conclusions are similar with the finding of the report from the 1st and 2nd Gatherings.

Significant conclusions in overall include:

1. **Need for Educational Support:** Educational programs focusing on topics like Roma history, conflict management, and combating stereotypes are essential for developing skills and self-confidence among Roma women.
2. **Importance of Information and Awareness:** Raising awareness within the community about the importance of education is crucial for changing stereotypes and creating more opportunities for Roma women within the education system.
3. **Significance of Participation:** Roma women's participation in these types of meetings is particularly important for their community and society at large. Their presence enhances the exchange of opinions and experiences, providing an opportunity for the voices and needs of these women to be heard.
4. **Education and Empowerment:** Workshops held previously serve as a bridge to empowerment, connecting with education and empowering Roma women by providing information about educational options.
5. **Creating Dialogue:** Women's meetings provide the opportunity for dialogue and the exchange of opinions among Roma women, positively impacting mutual understanding, solidarity, and support.
6. **Collaboration and Active Participation:** Collaboration with local authorities, community centers, and mediators enhanced the organization of the meeting, while the active involvement of relevant stakeholders facilitated the meeting's execution.

The meetings of Roma women are expected to contribute to promoting equality, social inclusion, and education, strengthening the voice and participation of Roma women in society.

Evaluation of preparations for the 3rd Dialogue Meeting of Roma women in Greece

The third Roma Women's Gathering in Greece was coordinated by the AID team and its members in collaboration with the Coordination Committee. Prior to the organization of the 3rd Gathering, local empowerment workshops for Romani girls were held in Thessaloniki and Larissa. The aim was to empower the girls on Roma history, conflict management, stereotypes, prejudices, and to help them understand how to engage in educational participatory activities while highlighting their needs. Over 30 Romani women and girls, aged 15 to 33, took part in these workshops.

These workshops were supported by the European Youth Foundation as part of the Romni Si Zor project. The Organizing Committee comprised a total of 15 members, 10 Romani women, two AID members, and a representative from the Municipality of Ampelokipoi-Menemeni. The Committee was enriched with five new members, Roma girls aged 15 to 30.

The Romani women actively participated throughout the entire process and took substantial roles in the organization, becoming leaders. In preparation for the third meeting, the Committee began systematic meetings in April 2023. However, the elections and the floods and disasters in Thessaly led to the meeting's postponement twice and the rescheduling of dates.

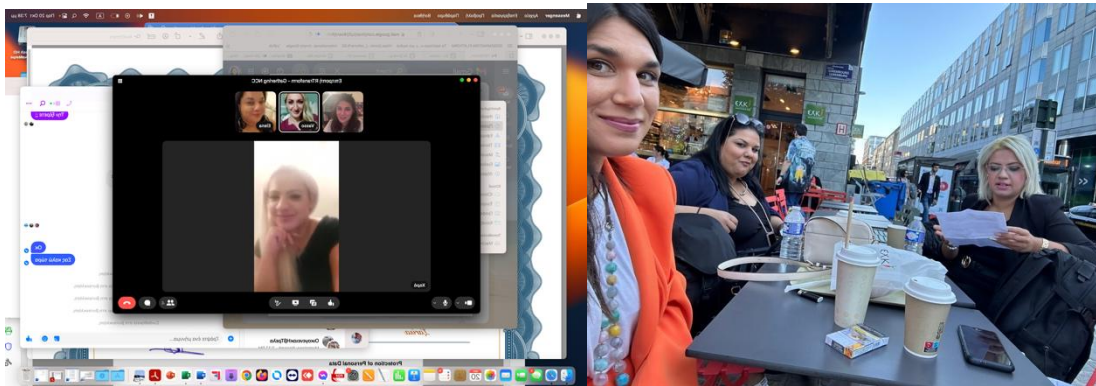
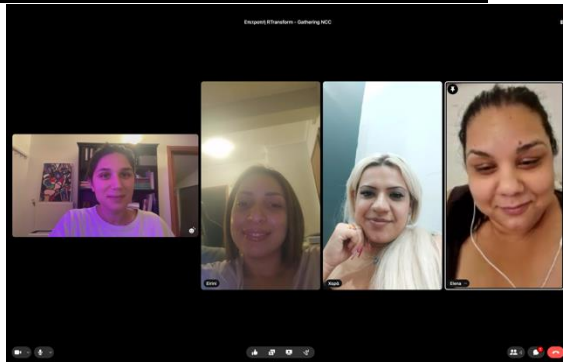
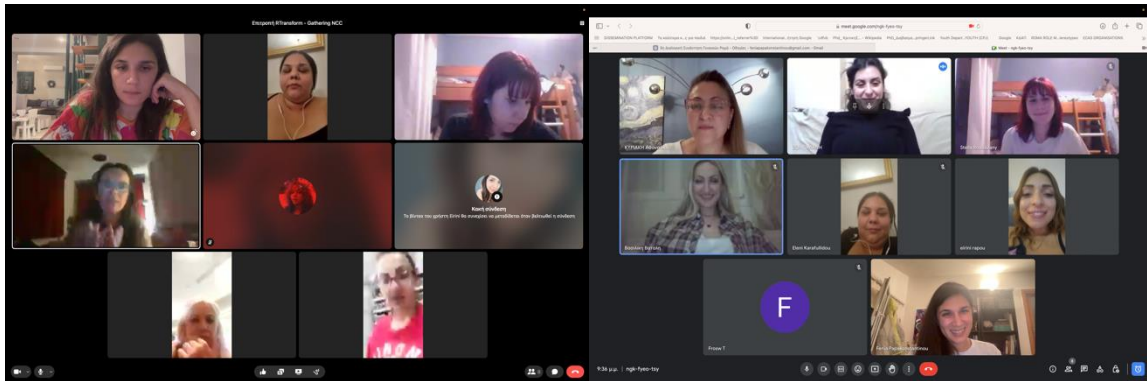
The collaboration with the 4th Primary School of Tyrnavos and its director was constructive and laid the groundwork for more activities. Before the meeting, an AID member along with a Committee member visited the venue, documented the necessary equipment required, and assessed the suitability of the rooms for the activities. Provisions were made for the children to be creatively engaged with an educator.

It's worth noting that a virtual meeting was organized with Discussion Facilitators and experts before the meeting to adequately prepare them for coordinating discussions in the working groups, providing them with instructions.

Several meetings were held in preparation for the event, along with continuous communication, individual meetings with Committee members via telephone, and constant updates through the active group formed for this purpose, which has been active since the start of the project.

The Committee meetings took place both in person and online (Google Meet, Messenger), focusing on organizing and coordinating actions for the 3rd Women's Romani Dialogue Meeting in Greece, making decisions on issues such as educational and promotional material creation, selection of the meeting's theme, speaker selection and preparation, venue arrangements, transportation, and discussions about activities for children.

Photo material of Organizing Committee meetings:



For the 3rd Dialogue Meeting, we warmly thank:

- All the Romani women who honored us with their presence.
- The 4th Primary School of the Municipality of Tyrnavos and Mrs. Theodora Blakou for their unwavering support and provision of the venue.
- The Community Center of the Municipality of Pavlos Melas and Mediator Irene Rapou, an active member of the Organizing Committee.
- The Romani Community Center Branch of the Municipality of Volos for the participation of the Mediator and their staff in the meeting.
- The Romani Community Center Branch of the Municipality of Ampelokipoi-Menemeni, specifically Mediator Eleni Karafyllidou, for active participation in the Organizing Committee and coordinating the discussions of the 3rd Dialogue Meeting. Also, Kyriaki Athanasiou and Vasiliki Vatali for their speeches and the creation of educational material as experts.
- The Romani male Mediators who accompanied the women.
- The Social Cooperative Enterprise "REYMA" for the participation of its representatives.
- The members of the Organizing Committee for their invaluable contribution.