

**ELENA GOROLOVA's VOICE**

“My name is Elena Gorolová and I live in the Czech Republic, in the town of Ostrava. I have been working in a nonprofit organization, *Vzájemné soužití* (Life Together) for four years, one of those years as a volunteer. I am also a civil society member of the Czech Government Council for Roma Community Affairs. Life Together is a civic association, a registered, non-political, non-governmental and non-profit organization which has been working in Ostrava since the floods there in the year 1997. The association strives to create friendly platforms for communication between the Roma and non-Roma communities in Ostrava. Through the community work method, Life Together attempts to improve the social and living conditions of families who are poor and in need. The association focuses on the areas of humanitarian aid, education, human rights, social and legal counseling, employment, conflict resolution and mediation, and the issue of housing. The director of the organization is Sri Kumar Vishwanathan, a person whom I very much appreciate, as he gave me a helping hand by employing me despite the fact that I was a Romani woman without higher education or experience in working with clients. Prior to working for Life Together, I was unable to find employment for a very long time; there is no doubt this was because I am a Romani woman without a high school diploma. I had to wait 15 years for such an employment opportunity.

Everything started five years ago, when several organizations – the League of Human Rights, the European Roma Rights Centre, and Life Together – held a meeting for women whose health and lives had been affected by forced sterilization. At first we met at the Life Together office to write down our experiences and the facts about how we had been involuntarily sterilized. At every meeting, we each spoke more and more about what we had gone through, and we discovered that we suddenly felt much better when we could finally speak openly about it. Our claims were investigated by the Czech ombudsman, Dr Otakar Motejl, who reviewed complaints from more than 80 women. We then created a group focused on involuntary sterilization and met regularly at Life Together. At first we were concerned that our involvement might harm us in some way if we were to take a public stand, be photographed, or speak to the media, so in the beginning we were photographed only from behind so as to hide our faces. Most of the women who were afraid were from socially deprived families, and they were concerned that the authorities would stop their welfare benefits or even institutionalize their existing children. We agreed to meet on the first Friday of every month. Over time, more and

more women joined the group, which gave us all the strength to fight against these violations of our integrity. This group is primarily a Roma group. The women have set the following goals:

1. Promoting the concept of informed consent.
2. Promoting patients' rights.
3. Awareness-raising about forced sterilization.
4. Improving medical staff's behavior toward women in maternity wards.
5. Compensation for the crimes committed against us
6. A public apology by the Czech government for its failure to protect us.

In one of our awareness-raising efforts, the women were given disposable cameras and used them to photograph their homes and neighborhoods to show the impact the forced sterilization had on their lives. They succeeded in creating excellent images that capture their feelings. The photographs were exhibited in various places in the Czech Republic; the first exhibition was at the Museum of Roma Culture in Brno, followed by the Chamber of Deputies in Prague under the auspices of Czech MP Kateřina Jacques. The exhibition then traveled to the library in Ostrava, to nonprofit organizations in Karvina and Most, and to a middle school. It has also been shown at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and at a Romani women's conference in Stockholm.

The group continued its mission by demonstrating in front of the Ostrava – Fifejdy hospital, where many women have been illegally sterilized. On that same day, I was presenting information to CEDAW at the UN in New York, and the first exhibition of our photos opened in Brno. The issue was covered by all the Czech newspapers and television stations. After the demonstration, most of the women had to deal with many local papers writing untrue articles about them. These articles reported on how the women were perceived by their neighbors, alleging that they owed people money, or that they did not pay rent, or comparing the difference between the states of mind of Romani and non-Romani women when consenting to sterilization. One of our demonstrators was on disability leave from her employer at the time, but local journalists photographed her at the demonstration and sent the photos to her employer, who then fired her. The women have had very bad experiences with local journalists and are still unwilling to grant interviews as a result.

Slowly but surely, the changes for which we have been fighting are gradually being realized. For example, the term "informed consent" is now part of the vocabulary at hospitals. The women from our group have helped by coming forward and showing that they are not afraid. Two women who were involuntarily sterilized, Ms Ferenčíková and Ms Červeňáková, have sued the hospitals involved; so far they have only been awarded written apologies, and financial compensation for these

harms has been denied to them due to a three-year statute of limitations. Last year, another 20 women who have been involuntarily sterilized at various times joined our efforts. In one very new case from the year 2007, a woman underwent sterilization merely because her social worker threatened to place her children in state care otherwise; afraid that her family would be broken up, she agreed to the operation. She is now filing a complaint and will have legal representation. She is from a socially disadvantaged background, has four children, and lives in a hostel with communal facilities.

Recently I have been meeting at hospitals with their gynecological staffs. The doctors all have different opinions about these involuntary sterilizations, but they do agree that today they themselves are better informed about it thanks to the women from our group. After 20 years, I had the experience of meeting with the doctor who had provided me with prenatal counseling prior to the delivery during which I myself was involuntarily sterilized, and after our conversation she tried to apologize by saying that in those days she herself was not as informed as she is today. My response was that since I cannot ever have children again, her apology comes too late. It is very hard for me to meet face to face with the doctors who have committed these violations.

Giving birth is one of the most beautiful things in the world but we Romani women have been prevented from exercising this capacity freely. In Czechoslovakia, the policy was to reduce the birth rate of Romani children. Some of the women who were involuntarily sterilized then experienced problems such as divorce. Their husbands did not want to live with them because they could not have any more children, which is a great shame for a Romani man. Most of the women in our group later also underwent hysterectomies for health reasons; to this day they all experience health problems such as migraine headaches, spinal pain, and stress.

Now I would like to tell you my own story. My mother never told me that childbirth could occur any other way than spontaneously. During my pregnancies I was working at a steel mill, and I visited their counseling center for expectant mothers. No one there ever informed me that a Caesarian section delivery might be in the cards for me.

I gave birth to my first child at the age of 19. Since it was a breach birth I was unable to deliver spontaneously, so a Caesarian section was performed on me at Vítkovice Hospital in Ostrava. At the time my husband was serving in the military, very far away from Ostrava; during his two years of compulsory service he only had three opportunities to see his son. We did not have our own apartment, so I lived with my parents and took care of my child on my own, which was very hard. We did not plan to have another child quite so soon, but then in 1990 I gave birth to our

second son, again by Caesarian section. After delivering my second son, the doctors immediately sterilized me.

When my water had broken during this second birth, something happened to the umbilical cord. I was in labor and was unaware of what was taking place; it was very confusing and there were many doctors all around me. A nurse came to me with a paper and asked me what name to give the child, depending on whether it would be a boy or girl, so I gave the names. She then gave me another paper and said I had to sign for the sterilization. At the time I had no idea what that meant. I was in great pain, so I signed the paper that was given me. Under those circumstances I would have signed my own death sentence.

After the operation was over I received an injection of pain relievers and fell asleep immediately from the exhaustion. The next day I was taken into the post-operation room with the other mothers and they told me I had a son.

On his rounds, the head physician of the maternity ward told me what they had done to me and said I would never be able to have children again. I began to cry. I was only 21 years old and my husband and I had wanted to have a little girl. When my husband and my mother came to the visit me at the hospital, they were told what had been done to me.

My husband's reaction was to yell at the doctor for performing such a serious surgery without informing him. The doctors argued that there had been complications during the birth and unforeseen circumstances, and that they had performed the surgery to prevent unwanted pregnancy. My husband began to cause a scene both with the doctor and with the whole hospital. For a long time he could not bear the thought that we could not have any more children, My mother was also in shock for a very long time after it happened.

After I was released from the hospital, my husband and I also visited the social services department to demand an explanation as to who had ordered the hospital to do this. Because we are Romani, the social services people were extremely rude to us and threw us out. They explained nothing. I finally received an explanation from the nurse who came to check up on my baby. My mother asked her whether I could have children again and she explained that it was not possible as they had severed my Fallopian tubes. She said that previously the method had been to tie the tubes, but that some women had become pregnant despite this.

In the beginning those were very unpleasant days for me. My husband held it against me that I could not have any more children; it made me less of a woman. For my husband, as a man, it is a great indignity even today, because we live in the Roma community.

I would like to thank all of the women who are fighting against involuntary sterilization, including Gwendolyn Albert for her excellent work and assistance. I would like to thank the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for inviting me here and making it possible to present this information about involuntary sterilization. My message for all women who have suffered such violations is: Don't be afraid, join us!"

*Translated from the Czech by Gwendolyn Albert*

For further information:

**Elena Gorolová, spokesperson** (Czech or Romanes only)  
Group of Women Harmed by Forced Sterilization / Human Rights Team  
O.s. Vzájemné soužití/ civic association Life Together  
Bieblova 6  
Moravská Ostrava  
702 00  
ČR/ Czech Republic  
tel.: + 420 596 111 894  
mobil: + 420 775 761 194  
email: [LPT.souziti@seznam.cz](mailto:LPT.souziti@seznam.cz)  
<http://vzajemnesouziti.cz/en/>

**Gwendolyn Albert** (English, Czech)  
Director,  
Women's Initiatives Network  
Peacework Development Fund  
Prague, Czech Republic  
[gwen@peacework.org](mailto:gwen@peacework.org)  
tel.: +420 774 895 444  
[www.peacework.org](http://www.peacework.org)