

THE ROMA IN GREECE

10 a.m.–1 p.m. Working session 16: Tolerance and non-discrimination I (continued),
– Roma and Sinti issues, including: Implementation of the OSCE Action Plan on

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Most of you are aware of the situation of the Roma communities, not only in Greece but all over Europe. You, most probably, hear about the attempts of some Roma to go to rich central and northern European states to work, or to claim refugee status. Thereby, you are also aware of them being sent back as bogus refugees. However, you are all aware of the situation in which the Roma communities, which reside in makeshift camps (which is the majority of the Roma population), encounter: their life is characterized by total exclusion and discrimination in all aspects of their daily life, whether that concerns their settlement status, the conditions of their shelter, their access to education and labour, their civil status and access to health and social services, that is, of goods and services which are generally available to the population in any country.

Usually, when people in decision making positions hear about this, appear to be concerned, but they point to the difficulties the state has in alleviating these problems and thus, they point the finger to the Roma themselves, for not doing enough to change the situation in which they are in. **But do you really know what total exclusion is and how it can be diminished?**

Today, from this forum, I ask you to imagine what the life of a Roma woman living in a camp is like and to consider if she is to blame and furthermore, how things may change. Imagine:

- a woman who does not know how to write and read, not even her own name,
- who has none of the marketable qualifications to look for a job, and when she begs or sells flowers, she gets a high fine for doing an illegal activity,
- who was forced to “marry”, informally, as a child, at the age of 12-14
- who bore children while she was a child, and who has to take care of them, feed them, dress them, keep them safe and healthy, provide them with the knowledge to survive and avoid dangers, with no money, no job, no running water available, or any of the facilities which you take for granted. Her only help comes from other women of the community,
- a woman who in addition to her own children, she has to take care of her unemployed, or scrap gathering (or otherwise engaged), “informal” husband, who exercises absolute control over her, her decisions and movements, and even her own body
- who, simultaneously with the above, also has to care for other older relatives, parents, or aunts and uncles, who also control her activities,

- a woman who in order to take her children to school would have to take the permission of the aforementioned male members, who will have to walk a great distance to take them to school,
- who when she reaches the school, she will be sent away for being dirty, or not having the proper documents. She may also leave if she finds that the school represents a health hazard for her child. If her children are allowed to go to school, she will have to make sure that she is around so that they would not be bullied and in the end, she will have to struggle, against all odds, to keep them in school
- a woman who, in total, sustains her family and community

In view of this reality, you, who are in decision making positions, what would you have her do? **What would you practically offer her** that it would not be of a **temporary handout but will assist her to end the wall of social exclusion that surrounds her?**

The situation even worse for the Roma of Western Thrace, they live under the pressure of the Turkish consulate in Western Thrace in order to define themselves as Turks and Roma Muslims.
