

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Respected representatives of countries,
governmental and non-governmental organizations,

First I would like to express my thanks to the organizers of this Working Session. I was very pleased to accept the invitation of the First Deputy Director, Mr Douglas Wake, who has asked me to open Working Session 6 on Roma/Sinti and, in particular, on the empowerment of Roma women.

As a woman, I am very much aware of the seriousness of this topic, which must be further promoted and rendered more visible. The equality of men and women is one of the fundamental rights and represents one of our common values; therefore, all of us should strive towards achieving it.

It is evident, both generally and on the basis of studies that have been made, that women have fewer opportunities to be paid the same wages for the same work as men. In the Czech Republic at least, most people are convinced that it is more difficult for women to get a job corresponding to their qualifications and abilities. If we focus more on Roma women, their situation is more specific and the differences between women and men are much more striking.

OSCE Member States have agreed to comply with Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality and the Resolution on Promoting Policies on Equality between Women and Men of the Roma Population (2011). The OSCE's "Action plan on improving the situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE area" was adopted in 2003. A major shift in this area has also been witnessed in the European Union: the issue of Roma integration has been on the EU Council's agenda and Roma women are not ignored in its conclusions. The situation of Roma women and their discrimination problems have been also a focus of the national Roma Integration Strategies required by the European Commission.

These documents illustrate the process adopted by the states of Europe, in which the Czech Republic has also been actively involved. For instance, the fifth of the Ten Basic Principles of Roma Inclusion, adopted during the Czech Republic Presidency of the EU Council, states the following:

Roma inclusion policy initiatives need to take account of the needs and circumstances of Roma women. They address issues such as multiple discrimination and problems of access to health care and child support, but also domestic violence and exploitation.

In other words, Roma women are more likely to experience social exclusion than both Roma men, and women in the majority community. Roma women are particularly vulnerable and suffer disadvantages such as limited access to employment, education, health and social services. They are often victims of multiple discrimination: discrimination on the grounds of gender and of ethnic origin. Moreover, they run a higher risk of being victims of domestic violence, trafficking and exploitation than women in mainstream society.

The importance of 'explicit but not exclusive targeting' of Roma women cannot be overstated: first as a legitimate affirmative action in its own right; and secondly for the wider, long-term impact on the community and wider societal cohesion. As primary carers for their children and most often the mediators between family, state institutions and service providers, the active engagement of Roma women in community development and policy implementation is a prerequisite for successful interventions in areas such as child protection, education, and health care.

Roma women also have a crucial role to play in promoting inclusion. Therefore the emancipation of Roma women was a ground-breaking priority during the Czech Republic presidency in the Decade of Roma Inclusion, which took place from July 2010 until June 2011. We focused on the Roma woman's views of the policies and tools directed at social inclusion.

We emphasised the role of Roma women in the creation and implementation of such tools, referring to examples of Roma women who themselves create projects and become involved in local and central strategic plans. Regarding education, we stressed the importance of achieving the highest possible level of education, which provides for better opportunities of finding a job in the labour market and for building own's own career and independence. A number of Roma girls focus their future on motherhood, not realizing the crucial importance of achieving a level of education and taking one's place in the labour market in order to stabilize the social and economic situation of their families.

There are many good recommendations regarding the empowerment of Roma women: but much remains to be done not only by state institutional support and funding but also by the determination of parents, communities and men to have it become a reality.

It is important to let Roma women discuss and voice their views and opinions, but even more important is to work towards changing the mind set of the general public (by fighting stereotypes) and among Roma men. Achieving progress in the emancipation of Roma women also requires sufficient information obtained by professional research. Studies generally focus either on the Roma as a community or on women in general. Researchers rarely deal with the topic of Roma women as such, for example in connection with their participation in inclusion projects.

It is necessary to strengthen the position of the Roma, including Roma women, in today's society. Through their own lives, Roma women have begun to create successful role models; Roma girls study at universities, establish successful organizations which benefit the entire community, thus promoting an equal approach within society. Despite such success, Roma women still lag behind mainstream women in many respects as regards emancipation. More highly educated Roma women are needed.

Moreover progress in women rights and equality can be achieved through and thanks to education; Roma girls and women need to have a better start to education and need to stay in education; it is challenging in communities suffering because of poverty and marginalization, but it needs to be stressed: "education is not an enemy of tradition or identity; it can come together".

One of the projects implemented in the Czech Republic and focused on this issue, is the project of the Slovo 21 non-profit organization called Manushe, which since 2000 has been bringing together over 170 Roma women and men of various ages and levels of educational achievement from the whole of the Czech Republic. The project consists of a number of various activities focused on Roma women who should be characterized as:

- educated, independent, emancipated and self-confident Roma women, able to express their needs and requirements and knowing how to fight for them.

The project has the following objectives:

- the active involvement of Roma women and girls in society;
- enhancing the self-confidence (self awareness?) of Roma women and girls;

An important role in this process is played by education, successful combining of traditions and emancipation in the Roma community and an improving position of Roma women in the labour market.

While talking about the education of Roma women, we should refer to the general problems faced in education not only by Roma women but also by Roma children. In particular, marginalization and social exclusion led to the case of D.H. et al. vs. Czech Republic bringing about a significant change in this area, because it pointed to excessive numbers of pupils from socially excluded localities being placed outside mainstream education. Such reduced educational opportunities have an adverse effect on the development of such children and on the possibility of their finding their place in society in adulthood.

Recent development shows that remedies are ready to be implemented. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, there are now measures to ensure appropriate conditions in mainstream schools for the inclusion of different children. The next step is to ensure that the legislation not only gives priority to but also allows for individual integration (beside expressly preventing placement of children without handicaps in schools and classes established for children with disabilities).

Roma Women as an agent of social change

In their role of agents of social change, Roma women have major potential for their own advancement and for that of their community. Roma women can become the initiators of social changes, particularly in an environment characterized by poverty and social exclusion. However, such women should be aware of the challenges they may encounter on such a path, both from the part of Roma men and from society.

In areas such as employment or education and in connection with social exclusion, existing data indicate that Roma women play one of the key roles in the functioning of the family.

- Roma women take care of running the household, of financial management and of communication with the authorities and schools.
- It is women who are responsible not only for day-to-day functioning of the family but very often also for procuring adequate financial resources.
- The enhancement of and an emphasis on the position of women is of long- and short-term importance for the improvement of the overall situation of the family and the larger community.

For the sake of a better understanding of the position of Roma women, I would refer to yet another element that is no less important than the others. This is the social exclusion that has already been mentioned in connection to Roma women emancipation.

The topic of emancipation is out of reach for women living in many excluded Roma localities. Despite playing a fundamental role in the functioning of the community, the women are not perceived in this way. The problems faced by them do not concern their emancipation, but carving out a living for themselves and their families. Only in this respect can we perceive the importance of education in contrasting miserable living conditions, high unemployment and a lack of role models in their environment.

As regards Roma women, in the Czech Republic we are trying to come to terms with our negative past. Cases of unlawfully sterilized women do not show a positive image of Czech society. On the other hand, even such cases illustrate the difficult situation of Roma women. Their testimonies showed that this overpowering intervention into their integrity and womanhood had a crucial impact on the functioning of their families and on relations with their partners, because it led to a degradation of their role as women. As a secondary consequence, a number of them had to face contempt on the part of their partners, which resulted in problems in their partnership relations.

At the end of 2009, the Czech Government expressed its regrets over these errors and undertook to adopt measures to prevent such acts in the future. In connection with this, the Government also charged the Minister of Health with certain tasks. As a result of the civic activity of Roma women, this issue was discussed in the Government Council for Human Rights, which this February approved a recommendation to the Government to provide compensation to some women who were unlawfully sterilized. The method of such compensation is currently being discussed intensively with involved ministries and I will do my best to remedy the women.

As part of the activities of my Office, my colleagues and I have been trying to ensure maximum possible visibility for the opinions of Roma women. I can illustrate this, for instance, by the membership of the Council of the Government of the Czech Republic for Roma Community Affairs:

six out of its 13 current Roma members are Roma women. They are not the only ones who could talk about the difficulties of holding a position among male colleagues. We have been also trying to have the maximum possible number of qualified Roma women and men in public administration. Since we have an opportunity to organize a number of conferences and seminars, we also clearly declare at such conferences and seminars that Roma women are experts who bring with them an important insight into various issues.

I am pleased to inform you that on October 18 a round table will take place, to which I have invited Roma women from the Czech Republic to discuss their needs and the support which they expect from the state to improve their emancipation in society. We believe that we will address many women who could contribute by their example and activities to such an overall change in society.

For myself I can say that, although I do not face such prejudice and stereotypes as Roma women, I do understand their situation. My work responsibilities include responsibility for Roma integration. Therefore I, as a woman, often come into contact with many Roma representatives and often ask myself how seriously I am taken by Roma men who endorse traditional views. At the same time, I do not ask this question only in respect of Roma men but also in respect of the relation of men and women in general. But of course that is a topic for a different, more wide-ranging discussion.

I am pleased to be able to take part in this Working Session and hope that it will result in a clear call for and support for activities that should benefit Roma women. The process of emancipation of Roma women is not easy. This is the reason why it is necessary to further and intensively promote this process, not to give up and to carry it forward by gradual steps so that we can meet in our society an increasing number of strong and self-confident Roma women who will serve as examples to others.

Thank you for your attention.