



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### Session 6

## **Roma/Sinti and, in particular, the empowerment of Roma women**

As prepared for delivery by Dr. Ethel Brooks  
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In the 1990 Copenhagen Document, the OSCE participating States recognized the particular human rights problems faced by Roma. Romani women and girls, in particular, are doubly disadvantaged. As women, we face the challenge of combating multiple prejudices based on ethnicity and gender. Romani women and girls with disabilities feel an additional level of stigma and discrimination.

In a report on equality and non-discrimination in Europe, the European Commission underlined that all the national surveys and studies indicate that the Roma, and *in particular Roma women*, have lower levels of education, higher rates of unemployment, lower levels of income and poorer health than the rest of the population. The trendlines are negative: in some countries, the standard of living for Roma women is actually declining.

Since this is a meeting to review implementation of OSCE commitments, I want to touch on a few of the most critical or illustrative examples of disregard for the human rights of Romani individuals and some of the ways in which Romani woman are particularly affected.

This November 13th marks the fifth anniversary since the European Court issued its landmark holding in *D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic* – a critical school desegregation case widely portrayed as analogous to the U.S. case *Brown v. Board of Education*. The ruling decision in this case, however, has not been adequately implemented. There continues to be an enormous disparity in equal access to education between Roma and non-Roma, and de facto, sometimes blatant segregation persists in a number of OSCE participating States. In some OSCE member states, Romani children are either prevented from attending schools or placed in special education settings due to the perceived stereotypes that they are intellectually disabled, which places them at a disadvantage early on in life. A study published by the U.S. National Institutes of Health in 2010 (one of many to reach similar conclusions) found that a mother's reading skill is the greatest determinant of her children's future academic success, outweighing other factors, such as neighborhood and family income. Thus, the impact of Romani girls' exclusion from mainstream education systems is amplified.

In 2006, the U.S. delegation to this implementation meeting voiced particular concern about the housing crisis facing members of Roma communities, including the destruction of houses and forced evictions. The situation is no better today. Violence and threats of violence, forced evictions, and endemic discrimination has led to the displacement of tens of thousands of Roma individuals across Europe. Some Romani communities – long settled and newly displaced alike

– lack basic services like electricity, trash removal and plumbing. This places unique burdens on Romani women. When a community lacks access to running water, how much time in a day or a week or a month must a Romani woman spend hauling water for bathing her children, cleaning the family's clothes, or cooking food?

More to the point, the housing crisis is not really “just” a housing crisis, but linked to broader pressing human rights issues, including: access to schools and public services, political marginalization and, the possibility of inter-ethnic violence. The marginalization of Roma is guaranteed as long as whole Romani communities are left “off the grid” – in unrecognized shantytowns, slums, ghettos, and settlements. When authorities in Belgrade attempted to relocate Romani families in April, these families were met with mob violence in their new communities. This summer, thousands of Romani individuals faced forced evictions in France. The United States remains especially troubled by new evictions of Romani families in September in the Romanian town of Baia Mare. Situations like this can strain families to the breaking point, making women more vulnerable to potential domestic abuse, the scourge of human trafficking and even less able to access protection or redress from authorities.

The United States remains concerned by the humanitarian hardships faced by Roma who fled conflict or war years ago, but who still lack regularized status in the countries where they live today and where their children were born. Some of them are effectively stateless. In many cases, they are also unable to obtain citizenship status in their home countries, leaving several generations of Romani families in legal limbo. As High Commissioner Vollebaek stated last year, “the risk of marginalization is higher for those without citizenship. The situation is even more precarious for those who also lack civil registration, and therefore are without any identity documents. This has been a protracted problem for far too many Roma... Because of this, they face additional obstacles in their access to basic public services. This is unacceptable.” Thus, Roma -- who have shorter life spans, higher incidents of infant mortality, etc., than majority populations – are at even greater risk. Lack of access to health care for Romani women jeopardizes not only their lives, but those of their children.

In Bulgaria, many Roma lack both proper identity documents as well as legal status for the homes in which they live. It now appears that these two problems are spiraling together to create yet a third problem: a new law requires people to own property or have a tenancy agreement in order to get identity documents, and without identity documents, they can't vote.

Threats to the physical safety of Roma remain a grave concern, as described in the U.S. statement to the Permanent Council in July and again September. Results of surveys of Roma women across Central and Eastern Europe indicate that Roma women are particularly vulnerable. As the UN Entity for Gender Equality has observed, “they face double barriers in accessing their rights. Along with the impunity of perpetrators of violence, this exacerbates Roma women's exposure to harm.” We are especially concerned about the recent threats against Romani communities in Hungary by far right extremists groups in Devecser and Budapest.

Mr./Madame Moderator, I welcome this meeting, enriched by the side events focused on many of these issues. I look forward to today's exchange.

Thank you.