



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 7

Roma/Sinti and, in particular, the empowerment of Roma women (cont'd)

As prepared for delivery by Dr. Ethel Brooks
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There are now a variety of fora in which our governments seek to address the situation of Roma. This includes the OSCE, the Decade of Roma Inclusion, the Council of Europe, and the European Union, which now requires member states to prepare Roma inclusion action plans. This focus on the situation of Roma signals a commitment to work towards greater economic, political, and social inclusion of this vulnerable group. It also reflects an understanding that the status quo – the widespread discrimination and marginalization of the Roma – is politically untenable, economically unsustainable, and morally indefensible.

Inevitably, the various “Roma strategies” will evolve and change. Ideas will be advanced, some discarded, and some improved. However, when a stated government strategy and actual government practices bear little resemblance and cannot be reconciled, what conclusions can we draw? When political discourse about Roma has more in common with the past than the future – for example, in the notion that physical separation from parents or policies aimed at limiting the number of Romani children born will advance Roma integration or improve the lives of Romani women – it shows the need for a more profound, root-and-branch change in the way Roma are perceived and portrayed throughout the OSCE region.

Mr./Madam Moderator, at last year’s human dimension meeting, my delegation noted the lack of disaggregated data regarding the situation of Roma. This disaggregated data should include data on the situation of Romani women, and in particular Romani women who are members of other marginalized groups and experience even higher levels of discrimination, such as women with disabilities. The need for more and better data collection is a common call among many Romani human rights NGOs and civil society more broadly – not to mention economists, educators, health care professionals, and so on. As OSCE participating States develop policies to improve the situation of Roma, it is critical to have measurable indicators to gauge what is working and what isn’t. Concerns that data collection may impinge on privacy or other rights are well founded and must be addressed, but should not be viewed as insurmountable, particularly since data collection is key to addressing and ameliorating the problems Roma face. The OSCE might be a useful venue to discuss how these concerns can be met.

Recognizing that individuals may face multiple forms of prejudice is an important part of the policy-making framework and the development of strategies designed to address a broad range of factors that cause the extreme economic, social and political marginalization of so many

Roma. We urge participating States to consider the intersection of ethnic and gender prejudice and discrimination as it relates to Romani women. At the same time, we believe concerns of Romani women will be more effectively addressed and advanced if they are not treated as a problem, but addressed in the broader context of ethnic and gender equality. The conversations we have about the particular challenges Romani women face must ultimately be reinserted into the broad human rights discourse among civil society actors and governments.

I would like to conclude my remarks, however, on an optimistic note. Because while the challenges Romani women face are daunting, there are so many examples throughout the region of courageous, committed and creative Romani women who are working to advance the rights of Roma. Just a few examples:

Indira Bajramovic, who founded Bosnia-Herzegovina's first Roma women's rights organization and Melina Halilovic, who leads a Roma youth initiative, helped to spearhead efforts to combat violence against Romani women. They conducted an extensive survey of Romani women, the first of its kind in Bosnia. The survey, and its disturbing results – 43 percent of the women reported having suffered physical violence – helped Romani women leaders highlight the problem and engage officials in dialogue about needed changes.

Katalin Barsony is a young Hungarian Roma who has been making short films documenting the lives of Roma women, in particular, for the past four years. Her films strive to show Roma women, she says, “as they really are and not as...the child-bearing machine/thief/burden on society representation of Roma that has prevailed throughout the centuries and is still so powerful. Our culture is still unknown to most, rumors and prejudices about who we are abound and make up a wall through which we are trying to break through to show, one story by one story, that we are individuals, mothers, daughters, wives.”

Agnes Osztolykan, the only female Romani member of the Hungarian parliament, was nominated by the State Department in 2011 as an “international woman of courage,” for her tireless work to promote Roma integration and educational opportunities for Romani children.

There are thousands of Roma women across Europe who are making a real difference in the lives of their families and communities and beyond. Let us honor them today, and commit ourselves to meaningful efforts to support the empowerment of Roma women going forward.

Thank you.