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THIRD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF ROMA WOMEN 24-25 October 2011, Granada, Spain

Statement by **Mr Jeroen Schokkenbroek**, Special Representative of the Council of Europe Secretary General for Roma Issues

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First let me to welcome you all to this Conference co-organised by the Spanish authorities and the Council of Europe.

I would like to thank warmly the Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, the Regional Government of Andalusia and all other institutions for supporting this event. My thanks go particularly to the Institute of Roma Culture for their considerable efforts for organizing this event and to the Finnish government for their financial support.

The full engagement of the Council of Europe in this event should be understood as a clear and strong signal of the commitment of the Council of Europe to furthering the protection of human rights of Roma women.

As I am sure you all know, this year's Nobel Peace Prize was attributed to three women fighting for change in their respective conservative closed societies or war-torn countries, for their non-violent struggle to promote women's rights, democracy and peace. This is a source of inspiration for all those who work for a better future.

At the Council of Europe, we are convinced that Roma women are a quiet but strong force for change, both a change in the fate of their communities' lives, as well as in their condition as women facing multiple discrimination.

All of you here carry a personal story of struggle, of perseverance and of small victories in your daily lives and I congratulate you on making your voices heard.

The Roma women's movement is now a reality as is evident when I look around this meeting room and see Roma women from the four corners of the world. You have every reason to be proud of how you have contributed to this. You are taking full advantage of the new possibilities opening up to you and are assuming your share of responsibilities.

Whether you are lobbyists with governments and international institutions, project managers, legal defenders, activists or campaigners, all of your efforts have one single aim:

to ensure social justice for your communities and to see your people enjoying rights as every other European citizen does.

In your additional battle for gender equality, you were at the beginning alone. In Athens, your final declaration echoed your disappointment about the absence of support from the women's movement in Europe in your battle against the forced sterilization of Roma women.

Alliances among women are important, but you also know very well that there is a growing emphasis on men as potential and actual contributors to gender equality. Naturally, many men will continue to resist attempts to challenge the power they hold. Yet there are also men who are aware of the straightjacket imposed upon them by traditional notions of masculinity and who are consequently more open to reassessing their roles and responsibilities.

In Athens you set your own agenda for this meeting here: the respect of the human rights of Roma women within their communities. You wished to address burning issues strongly affecting your lives, the lives of your daughters and the future of your communities: early marriages, domestic violence, sexual diversity and so on.

In his address to the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF) plenary assembly in March 2011, Council of Europe Secretary General Jagland also spoke about human rights within

the Roma communities. Let me quote what he said to the members of the ERTF, which I believe is also relevant for your discussions at this Conference:

*"One of the messages I would like you to convey from this Plenary Meeting concerns **universal human rights**. These are fundamental rights that belong to everyone, young and old, women and men, Roma and non-Roma. I would ask you to explain within your own communities how these rights also apply within the community.*

Explain that for a child, education is primarily a right and for parents a responsibility.

Explain that early or forced marriages are not compatible with the personal autonomy and dignity of each human being.

Explain that these human rights demands do not mean that Roma should give up their identities, customs or traditions, as long as such traditions respect the human rights of others, Roma or non-Roma.

Explain that it is in the name of these very same human rights that the Roma are rightfully demanding a better life for themselves and for their children, with a real exercise of social and political rights, preservation of their identity and bringing an end to stigmatisation and discrimination.

If you do explain all this to the members of your communities, I am convinced you will have made an important step towards better respect for human rights of and within Roma communities.” [end of quote]

To make progress towards your own human rights within your own community, your messages should reach two very important actors: the states responsible for protecting your human rights and the men of your communities.

As regards the responsibilities of States, I draw your attention to a highly relevant new Council of Europe treaty, adopted in April 2011: the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. I encourage Roma women’s organisations to make good use of this innovative convention and to lobby for its ratification in your respective countries.

Relevant human rights obligations are also set out in other Council of Europe treaties, including the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in human beings, the European Social Charter and, last but not least, the European Convention on Human Rights. Several judgments of the European Court of Human Rights are of crucial importance to women’s rights, such as the *Opuz v. Turkey* judgment of 9 June 2009 about domestic violence. Judgment in a lead case about alleged forced sterilisation of a Roma woman (*V.C. v. Slovakia*) is expected before the end of the year.

But there is also a lot that can and should be done within your communities, especially by raising your own voices and making sure that men hear you.

You must encourage Roma men to move out of the confines of rigid gender divisions at home and in the community. You must encourage them to become more active in a more equal partnership. You must convince them to support opportunities for positive change and to reject violations of the basic human rights of their wives, daughters and sisters, such as domestic and other forms of violence, harmful practices, etc. It is crucial for men and women to nurture, promote, and sustain such change together.

We realise that this is not an easy process. It will require a lot of determination on your part, combined with tact, diplomacy and strategic thinking. But you can find strength in the knowledge that European laws, values and principles are on your side. Human rights are on your side.

Improving the lives of Roma women will of course have a considerable impact on the lives of their children and families too. Families rely on mothers and wives for emotional support and care, and increasingly, families rely on women for income needed to raise healthy children and care for other relatives.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since the last meeting in Greece, several tragic events in Europe have shown that anti-Gypsyism has reached dangerous levels. It is no longer limited to marginalisation – it has become hateful, aggressive, violent and organised. I am very much concerned by a certain stagnation, and sometimes deterioration, of the situation of Roma in Europe, which is not only related to bad economic conditions. We must use all available political, social and legal means to reverse this dramatic trend.

The Council of Europe High Level Meeting on Roma a year ago initiated a strong dynamic at European level in favour of Roma inclusion and a more action-oriented approach in the Council of Europe's work, through mobilisation and capacity-building.

As you will recall, the 2007 Stockholm meeting proposed making this international gathering an annual event under the auspices of a member State. The Council of Europe has been working on this with determination and I am therefore very pleased that Spain offered to host the third meeting, especially because of the important steps that this country has taken towards the integration of Roma communities.

I am also most pleased to announce to you here that the Finnish government has confirmed the hosting of the 4th International Conference of Roma Women in Finland, in the first half of 2013.

Today's meeting is of special significance as Roma women from different continents will enrich your discussions. This rightly underlines the universal nature of the issues you will be discussing: human rights are universal!

To conclude, I wish you all very fruitful discussions which I hope will lead to many concrete ideas, plans and strategies for making progress towards the full realisation of the rights and freedoms of Roma women.

Thank you for your attention.