



FOURTH INTERNATIONAL ROMA WOMEN'S CONFERENCE 16-17 September 2013, Helsinki-Espoo - Finland

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

Ms President Hallonen, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you, on behalf of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, to the Fourth International Conference of Roma Women organized jointly with the Finnish Government. I warmly thank the Finnish authorities, in particular the National Advisory Board on Romani Affairs and all those institutions which have supported this event taking place in a symbolic and inspirational place: the Hanasaari Swedish – Finnish Cultural Centre.

I am very pleased that this meeting is hosted by Finland, a country that has demonstrated in words and deeds its commitment to both minority rights and gender equality, both at home and in Europe. I am most grateful for the consistent support by Finland to the Council of Europe's work to improve the social inclusion of Roma and promote the full respect of their human rights.

I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to Minister Aasrud from Norway and Minister Ullenhag from Sweden for honoring this Conference with their presence despite their extremely busy schedule.

A special word of welcome should also be extended to our friends and colleagues from other international organizations and institutions active in promoting the equal rights of the Roma women, in particular Mr. Truscynski of the European Commission, whose Directorate General has been a real partner for the Council of Europe, not least through our joint project on mediation with Roma communities, ROMED.

But above all, I welcome the representatives of those Europeans who are at the heart of Conference: the Roma women who have gathered here from all parts of Europe.

Personally, I feel rather privileged to attend the Roma Women's Conference for a second time since my appointment. I noticed with pleasure that men will be

participating alongside with women. The hope of a joint participation was expressed at the last Conference of Roma Women in Granada. I am happy that this wish is being realised. After all, men have an important role to play to make women's struggle for equality succeed.

In a private discussion during one of the ROMED national sessions with mediators, a young Roma woman summarised the essence of her being and her ambition for the future path of the Roma women movement by quoting the sentence of the American author Nora Ephron: "Above all, I want to be the heroine of my life and not the victim".

I was very happy and reassured to realise in the course of the preparations for this Conference that victimisation is not the road that Roma women want to follow. Very recently, policy discussions amid Roma scholars and activists on the sensitive issue of their self-image confirmed developments throughout the Roma movement.

The Council of Europe, which has worked since the 60s with Roma activists, sees this debate as the development of a movement which was started by a handful of Roma scholars and activists to become a grassroots struggle attracting the attention of governments and international institutions. The late Nicolae Gheorghe was a predominant figure of this movement and literally the first Roma man who came to the Vienna Conference in 2003 to express his support to the nascent Roma women's movement.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is the fourth International Conference of the Roma women and a retrospective on the themes of the previous conferences confirms the wise choice of Roma women over the issues to discuss: challenging traditional harmful practices; redefining traditional views of Roma women's role in their communities and in society; expressing disappointment over the absence of support by gender equality activists when Human Rights of Roma women are violated; denouncing the experiences of discrimination in everyday life and the negative way Roma women are portrayed in the mainstream media; stressing the need to invest more on Roma girls, particularly on education because girls can achieve anything they want if they have the right opportunities.

The Declarations of each Conference assert the aspirations of Roma women: more visibility of the role of Roma women as agents of change and in the socio-economic development of their families and communities; participation in the decision-making process; empowerment policies for Roma women and particularly young Roma girls who are in an extremely vulnerable position.... a

long list of recommendations asking governments to fulfill women's rights on the ground.

During the preparatory meetings of the Conference and through the social networks you expressed your concerns about the absence of follow-up to your recommendations; you even questioned the use of yet another conference since concrete policy actions are missing.

The time has come to make your aspirations a reality, to send a clear message to governments that you are the natural partners in the policy implementation process and that the Strategic document you will most probably adopt tomorrow is the fruit of your tireless work on Roma policies in your countries, with your communities, with local actors as mediators, as advocates, as experts.

In this Conference you will take stock of where we stand and what more needs to be done in advancing rights and opportunities for Roma women and girls. Your insight will help policy makers create useful solutions that increase your potential. The workshops address very important issues related to policy-making. I take the example of education, a priority which Roma women have highlighted during the consultation process.

Investing in the education of Roma children and particularly girls will not only create the possibility to shift their trajectory, but actually fundamentally create much more inclusive societies and economic growth. Somebody said "You educate a man; you educate a man: you educate a woman; you educate a generation". When we include girls in education, health and employment we have a better chance of preventing issues such as early marriage, teen pregnancy, and breaking the inter-generational cycle of poverty. Equally, if policies do not address the needs of Roma girls, these policies may never have the opportunity to help them as women.

Many ingredients for a successful policy on Roma women are in place: a critical mass of stakeholders is fully engaged to produce changes on the ground; nearly all Council of Europe member states have a policy or integration programme for their Roma population; local authorities are increasingly aware of their vital role in the success of policies; grassroots Roma organisations have proved valid interlocutors in the policy process; International Organisations invest finance and expertise.

Since the 60s the Council of Europe has drawn up several important recommendations to governments and set standards for housing, education, employment and health to be applied for Roma communities. In 2010 the Council of Europe shifted emphasis, moving from standard-setting towards concrete action focused on effective implementation of existing standards.

As in the past, this work integrates the gender dimension. The shift enables us to reinforce cooperation with international and national stakeholders through the Roma Mediators Programme (Romed) where Roma women play an essential role, the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion and to and to devise mechanisms through thematic groups within the Ad hoc Committee of Experts on Roma issues (CAHROM) for sharing experiences on specific policy questions raised by member states. One of the first issues addressed by the thematic groups was the school attendance of Roma children and particularly Roma girls. Two thematic reports addressed this topic in 2012 with the Netherlands as a requesting country and Hungary, Spain and Sweden as partner countries, and with Finland as a requesting country and Latvia, Norway, and Sweden as partner countries.

A small ad hoc working group of experts is currently preparing an analytical synthesis of the two above mentioned thematic reports that will be presented at the next CAHROM meeting (Rome, Italy, 28-31 October 2013). The CAHROM also nominated one of its members (Finland) as Committee rapporteur on gender issues. Roma women issues and the conclusions and follow-up of this Helsinki conference are on the agenda of the next CAHROM meeting. Roma women is also among the priorities of other bodies of the Council of Europe such as the Parliamentary Assembly and the Gender Equality Commission.

It is worth to mention a very interesting study on the situation of Roma women in Greece published in 2011 and the report on "Ending discrimination against Roma children with special focus to the Roma girls which was followed by a Parliamentary Assembly Resolution in April 2013.

Despite all this mobilisation, the Council of Europe is very much concerned by the widespread anti-Gypsyism which has not so far been correctly addressed by Governments at all levels social, political and legal. Policies cannot be successful if the majority population is not adequately addressed.

Equally, the national strategies for Roma tend to forget the important role of the Roma women and girls in the wellbeing of the communities. Success cannot be achieved without more investment in Roma women and girls and without include them in the policy making process.

We are missing data on the economic and development impact of keeping Roma women and young girls in the margins of society.

If however we compare the socio-economic situation of the Roma to that of the population in developing countries some statistics established by UN could provide us with some food for thought.

- In India, adolescent pregnancy results in nearly \$10billion in loss of potential income per year.
- In Uganda, 85 per cent of girls leave school early, resulting in \$10billion in loss of potential earnings.
- By addressing child marriage and early birth for one million girls in Bangladesh, the country could potentially add \$69billion to the national income over these girls' lifetimes.

We cannot but encourage member States to work more on gender disaggregated data collection as this is necessary for successful policy implementation. This week, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency is publishing results of a survey in 11 member States on the social situation of Roma women. It shows that on average their situation, notably in terms of education and employment, is worse than that of Roma men.

We all know that the path to Roma integration is strewn with challenges, deceptions and small victories. Change cannot be achieved by the Roma alone. Commitment on the part of the authorities and the non-Roma population is necessary. Making Roma women visible and changing their social and economic dynamics by providing them with specific, powerful and relevant resources is an investment we cannot overlook. It is an investment that should not be viewed as a favour but as a necessity.

This is why we look forward to this gathering with great expectations. I am convinced that you will all engage in fruitful debates, in order to make this conference productive and relevant.

In particular, I hope you will set a clear strategic agenda for Roma Women and girls and agree on ways to strengthen the Roma women's movement and its engagement with European and national policy makers. It is time to act now.

Ladies and gentlemen, earlier on, I mentioned the name of Nicolae Gheorghe, a key figure of the European Roma movement, who passed away last month. I had the privilege of discussing with him his ideas for the future of Roma integration in European societies. I would like to close my statement by honouring Nicolae Gheorghe's memory, in the presence of his widow, Nicoleta Bitu, an exceptional Roma woman activist, mother and "*compagnon de route*" of Mr Georghe. I now invite you to observe one minute of silence in his honour.

Thank you for your attention.