

Tal Lejondahls slott, Bro 3 december 2007
Nyamko Sabuni, Integrations- och jämställdhetsminister

Tal på konferens om romska kvinnors rättigheter

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Minister for the policy on national minorities, gender equality and the human rights implementation in Sweden, it is a great honour for me to welcome you to this conference on Romani Women's Rights Our Voices heard.

A priority for me and the government is to break the social exclusion that too often has been the marker of the daily lives of Roma. Not only in Sweden but in the whole of Europe. Sweden's ratification of the Framework convention for the protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for regional- or minority languages was a first step towards a Swedish policy on national minorities. Roma are one of Sweden's five national minorities and Romani Chib is one of Sweden's national minority languages. Important parts of the Swedish policy on national minorities are the measures aimed at strengthening, practicing and developing the languages and cultures of the national minorities. The Romani culture and the Romani language is an important part of Sweden's and Europe's common cultural heritage. Therefore I am particularly pleased that one of the official languages of this conference is Romani Chib.

For many women in the world the daily struggle for personal survival excludes them from active participation. We can not achieve human rights unless women and girls are given the same opportunities as men to shape their existence and exercise power over their lives. Gender equality is a condition for democracy and central to human rights. It is a question of empowering women and girls.

Sweden constantly strives to ensure girls and women's sexual and reproductive health and rights. Despite considerable progress, we still have a long way to go before we achieve gender equality. We need to take many more measures in order to ensure equal rights and equal opportunities for all girls and women, boys and men, in Sweden.

Considering the themes that will be addressed at this conference, I would like, as Minister, to underline that:

Control over ones own mind, body and sexuality are clear markers of integrity and independence. Threats, abuse and violence are severe forms of oppression and where they exist, girls and women can not have access to their human rights. These girls and women have the right to equal power to shape society and their own lives. They have the right to integrity and respect. I would like to state that it is essential that women and girls are aware of their rights. It is also essential that the rest of the society shares this knowledge.

It is time to agree and implement concrete actions that determine clearly how states and societies can guarantee all women and girls their fundamental freedoms and rights.

Even if this may mean going against traditional customs and practices. It is my hope that the discussions today and tomorrow will be characterized by reconciliation and dialog. Where all parties with an open heart can listen to one another's views. So that we together can improve the situation for Roma today. So that we can achieve equality.

NGO:s have an important role in encouraging women and girls to make active and informed choices. They find efficient methods of reaching women and girls on all levels globally, nationally and above all, locally. They can also adjust their campaigns to rapid changes. The women's movements play an important part in this work. Their efforts should be acknowledged and commended. They need the support and recognition that they have deserved. In this, we who are in decision making positions, have a collective responsibility.

I know that Roma in Sweden and Europe have a strong will to achieve empowerment. The majority society can assist the Roma with tools to defend and strengthen their possibility for empowerment. There is a need for a conscious strategy and the work must move forward and be characterized by reconciliation and dialog.

Regardless of where we live, democracy and respect for human rights are essential for our sustainable development. Without gender equality democracies can not function. The empowerment of individuals is of supreme importance and must be strengthened. If we are to achieve this, women and girls must have the possibility to take power over their lives.

The basic principle is simple: all people, regardless of sex, ethnic belonging, sexual orientation, age, disability or cultural and religious traditions, are of equal value and must be able to enjoy human rights. The principle of non discrimination is one of the cornerstones of human rights. It is guaranteed by a number of UN conventions. Among others the UN Declaration on Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. As well as European Council conventions such as the Framework Convention for the protection of National Minorities.

Despite this, the existence for Roma in Sweden has for centuries been characterized by discrimination and exclusion. Abuse of Roma in the form of banishment, forced transportation, ban on owning businesses, ban on immigration, forced sterilisations and forced assimilation are a reality. This has led to a mistrust of authorities among Roma.

Unfortunately this is not unique for Sweden. This has been the daily life for Roma throughout Europe. We have a common responsibility to change this.

Sweden has, since the 1960:ties, made a number of central and local governmental efforts in order to bring justice to these abuses, and to improve the situation for Roma in Sweden. Among other things special focus has been put on improving the situation for childrens and young peoples right to schooling. Over the last thirty years the efforts from the government has been formed in dialog and co-operation with Roma representatives. During 2006 the government appointed a delegation for Roma issues. With Sweden's international commitments for the protection of human rights as a base, we will nationally push for the improvement of the situation for Roma in Sweden. This work requires a close dialog and co-operation with Roma.

As some of you may know, I was not born in Sweden. I have my roots in Congo the so called Belgian Congo. I regularly meet representatives of national minorities.

When I meet romani women and men, I have had the opportunity to listen to Roma's relationship with the majority population - the Swedes. To me it has been like listening to and bringing back my conversations with my own Congolese people. I know what it is like to be deprived of ones language, ones culture, and indeed ones human dignity.

The work that is carried out within the Council of Europe to promote the situation for Roma is important. It is important not just to work for Roma, but with Roma. It is important that before decisions are made we listen to those who are actually concerned. It means that we have to listen to the priceless knowledge about their lives and their experiences. For the improvement of the situation of Roma in Europe, we as decision makers, Roma and the majority society, need to take a collective responsibility. Therefore it is my hope that we, in dialog, will be able to live up to the title of today's conference and listen to each other so that we with pride can say amare glasura ashunde!

Once again, let me extend to you a warm welcome to Sweden and this conference on Romani women's rights.