

**Key note speech by Constantinos Manolopoulos
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**Romani Women's Rights Conference
"Our Voices Heard"
Amare glasura ashunde
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Excellencies, Dear Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honour for our Agency to be a co-organiser of this conference along with Sweden and the Council of Europe. Allow me to thank the Government of Sweden represented by the Minister for Integration and Gender Equality Mrs. Nyamko Sabuni and the Council of Europe, represented by the Deputy Secretary General Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, for their contribution to this conference.

The Fundamental Rights Agency and the Council of Europe are engaged in a common endeavour to combat discrimination and promote equality for Romani women. In 2003, the predecessor of the Fundamental Rights Agency, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, the Council of Europe and the OSCE High Commissioner on National minorities published a report "Breaking the Barriers – Romani Women and Access to Public Health Care". And we made a commitment to follow up this project together with our partners in the Council of Europe. I am happy to note that the recommendations of the Report have been used extensively by the Council of Europe in its Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on better access to health care for Roma and Travellers in Europe, adopted in 2006. This is one valuable achievement. Another valuable achievement for the Fundamental Rights Agency has been the cooperation with Romani women activists. Since 2003, the Agency has facilitated meetings of Romani women and included Romani women activists as speakers at international conferences on Roma in order to support their engagement in dialogue with policy makers at national level.

In addition to the ongoing work on Romani women our Agency published in 2006 a comprehensive comparative report on Roma in Public Education, which examines the situation of Roma in the public education systems of all European Union Member States. This report was recently cited in the judgement delivered on 13 November 2007 by the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights in the case *D.H. v. the Czech Republic*. In this case, the European Court of Human Rights for the first time established that segregated schooling of Roma children constituted discrimination on the ground of ethnic origin making direct reference to the work of the Fundamental Rights Agency. These references are further evidence of the positive spirit of close cooperation between the Council of Europe and the European Union in the field of human rights. They also show how research and data collection work carried out by the Fundamental Rights Agency complements and reinforces the important work of the Council of Europe.

At this point I would like to share with you today three thoughts on women's rights regarding public health care.

First: Improving access to Romani women rights means enhancing participation and combating discrimination

Although we have come a long way in agreeing on norms against discrimination and developing policies to improve the situation of Roma, the situation of Roma people has not improved satisfactorily. The task of the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) is to collect data and document discrimination. Our reports have shown that Roma are still in many cases subjected to delayed care, segregation, verbal abuse and denial of services. Romani women are disproportionately affected by discriminatory treatment and have been also subjected to forced sterilization. To date, the situation has been remedied only partially. Romani Women have a great role in the process of addressing discrimination. Those who constitute the Romani Women Networks have achieved much, by promoting advocacy, activism, sharing common concerns and values among Romani women. I am convinced that the networks of Romani women will be able to benefit from inclusion in

the Fundamental Rights Platform, which will be the Agency's key instrument for communication with civil society.

Second: National policies combating health inequalities and discrimination should take a more holistic approach addressing the social determinants of health

The European Charter of Fundamental Rights specifies that *“Everyone has the right of access to preventive health care and the right to benefit from medical treatment under the conditions established by national laws and practices. A high level of human health protection shall be ensured [...]”* The recognition of the existence of inequalities in the access to health care services and discrimination against Roma in this respect, as well as the intention to combat these phenomena are highlighted in a number of national policies and public health programmes. However, due to the different historical development of health care systems in EU Member States their current structures, as well as the relevant policies and strategies are substantially dissimilar. Some countries have developed strategies and projects focusing on improving the health of specific vulnerable groups such as Roma. Others address the reduction of health inequalities in more general terms. Only a limited number of countries establish preventive multi-sectoral holistic strategies to tackle health inequalities and discrimination by addressing the social determinants of health: education, housing conditions, and employment.

Lastly: We need to step up the implementation of policies and monitor their impact

It has been said on a number of occasions that the situation of Roma in Europe has become a benchmark of EU's development in the field of fundamental rights and social justice. However, the credibility of policies ultimately depends on their implementation. Member States need to work out systematic and comprehensive strategies to ensure the full implementation of human rights treaties through the adoption of the appropriate policies and measures. At the same time they should also ensure that the implementation, outcome and impact of these policies and measures is adequately monitored and assessed.

In conclusion I would like to recall the 2005 Resolution of the European Parliament which specifically “Calls on Member States and candidate countries to take steps to ensure equal access to health care and social security services for all, to end all discriminatory practices, in particular the segregation of Roma in maternity wards, and to prevent the practice of nonconsensual sterilization of Romani women; The Resolution urges particularly the Fundamental Rights Agency to devote more attention to Anti-Gypsyism/Romaphobia in Europe and to allocate the necessary resources to monitor racial abuse and human rights violations against Roma;”

Rest assured Ladies and Gentlemen that the Fundamental Rights Agency is committed to respond positively to this Resolution as it is already evidenced by our work.

Thank you.