



Speech by Maud de Boer-Buquicchio
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Our voice is heard

Romani Women's Rights Conference

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Minister Sabuni, Dear Nyamko, Dear Colleagues, Dear Friends,

I believe that the starting point of our Conference must be an acknowledgment of a deplorable fact – that Roma in Europe continue to face widespread, deep-rooted and often officially endorsed discrimination and prejudice. Roma children are segregated in schools, some are left to learn in virtual ghettos. Roma are disrespected in their human dignity everywhere in Europe and on a daily basis. Roma women and men are violated in their physical integrity.

It is true that the picture is not equally bleak across the continent and that some countries have achieved more than others in the integration, respect for and the acceptance of Roma citizens in the society. However, human rights violations which I described exist; today and in Europe. Within that minority which is in itself in a very difficult and vulnerable position, there are Roma women. In addition to all the

prejudice based on their ethnicity, they suffer from discrimination and violence based on gender.

The fact that this conference will discuss an issue such as respect for reproductive rights and reports of forced sterilisation is a sobering illustration of where we stand when it comes to the respect for the most fundamental human rights and human dignity.

Before going into more detail about how the Council of Europe is working to improve the situation of Roma in our member states, I should like to make one general and I believe a very important preliminary remark. Apart from belonging to an ethnic minority, Roma are above all individuals and citizens – and as such, entitled to the full protection of the European Convention on Human Rights. It should go without saying – but it does not. Even the best intentioned authorities sometimes behave as if there was a footnote in the Convention allowing for a different interpretation of the human rights standards and safeguards when it comes to Roma – for their own sake, of course.

A major breakthrough was the Nachova case in which the loss of life of two Roma young men led the Court to rule that the right to respect of life of Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights which included the need to carry out proper investigation had been disregarded, and that this failure was the result of a discriminatory attitude adopted by the police.

School segregation is another example. It is very often defended in the name of the interests of the Roma children, with the argument that it

provides the best possible prospects for their education. The emphasis, of course is on the words "best possible" which are loaded with arrogance and prejudice. This is why the recent ruling of the European Court of Human Rights, in which it decided in favour of the families of 18 Roma children who had been placed in special schools by the Czech authorities, is so important.

The Czech Republic was not alone in having encountered difficulties in providing schooling for Roma children: other European States had had similar difficulties. The Court while recognising the efforts of the Czech authorities to ensure that Roma children received schooling and the difficulties they had been confronted with, was not satisfied that the difference in treatment between Roma children and non-Roma children was objectively and reasonably justified. Consequently, there had been a violation of Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 read in conjunction with Article 14 of the Convention.

The Council of Europe's first line of action is to protect and promote the rights of Roma, as members of their communities and as individual citizens.

We are doing this through a number of legal and political mechanisms, from the European Court of Human Rights that I have just described above, to the compliance procedure under the Revised European Social Charter, the work of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture, the monitoring mechanism of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the European Charter for Regional or Minority

Languages, the work of the European Commission against racism and Intolerance, and others.

On the specific issue of trafficking in human beings, which is one of the themes of this Conference, we have produced a new and, in many respects, ground-breaking legal instrument – the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.

The added-value of this Convention, which will shortly enter into force, is its broad geographical scope and the very strong emphasis on the protection of human rights and human dignity of the victims.

Trafficking in human beings is not only a Europe-wide, but a global phenomenon and threat. It is therefore evident that international co-operation is essential and that the higher the number of participating countries, the better the chances of stopping this modern form of slavery.

The Council of Europe anti-trafficking convention is not only open to the 47 member states, but also to the European Community and non-European countries. It is a legal instrument setting a framework for a joint action between countries of origin, transit and destination, not only in Europe, but also in the world.

The second aspect of the treaty is equally important. The underlying philosophy of the Convention is that it treats persons who are trafficked as victims, and not as offenders. It may sound obvious, but it is not.

It requires a change of attitude, but also a change of legislation and procedure in a number of countries which have the tendency to amalgamate trafficking and illegal immigration.

Awareness-raising is very important. The priority targets are the potential victims which should be better informed of the risks in order to be able to better protect themselves. However, we also need to target the traffickers and their accomplices. This is particularly important in cases involving children, or even babies which are smuggled and traded for purposes of illegal adoptions.

My colleagues will explain the main features of the Convention later on, but I would like to stress that its human rights approach is also very important in the context of our discussions here today. Firstly, because Roma women – and children – are frequent victims of traffickers and secondly, because prejudice against Roma - which is not uncommon even amongst law enforcement officials - may render their situation even more difficult and vulnerable.

My concluding remarks will be about the role of Roma – and Roma women in particular – in changing this situation.

The philosophy of the Council of Europe activities is that we do not work for Roma – we work with them. A genuine, far-reaching and comprehensive involvement of Roma representatives in actions and decisions affecting them is the only way forward. This is done through our close involvement with the European Roma and Travellers Forum

which held its Third Plenary Session in Strasbourg last week, but also through our training activities for Roma as lawyers or anti-trafficking mediators. In addition, we are conducting a very successful awareness-raising campaign entitled "Dosta", which means enough in Romani. The bottom line is that Roma do not need charity, they are entitled to respect.

In order to take full advantage of the new possibilities opening to them, Roma, including Roma women, need to assume their full share of responsibilities.

Respect for cultural identity, diversity and tradition must go hand in hand with respect for essential principles of the European society – such as gender equality. Tradition cannot justify gender discrimination and submission.

I am very critical about the attitude of not only a majority of the population, but also of the authorities in several European countries. However, I believe it is also necessary to be open and honest about the work which has to be done within and by the members of Roma community.

The way to have the voice of Roma women heard is to empower them. And the way to empower them is to give them responsibilities and give them respect - as women – and as Roma.

Amare Glasura Ashunde