

OUR VOICES HEARD

Report from the Romani Women's Rights Conference December 2007 in Sweden



REGERINGSKANSLIET

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of Sweden

Our Voices Heard!

Our Voices Heard – Amare Glasura Ashunde – a Romani Women’s Rights Conference held in Sweden in December 2007 provided a forum for discussion about the challenges facing Romani women today. It was an opportunity to share information and good practices between policymakers and Romani Women’s Networks across Europe.

This magazine is based on the speeches and discussions held at the conference, which was co-organised by the Swedish Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality, the Council of Europe and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

The core themes of the conference were: Romani Women’s Rights, Combating Trafficking, Respecting Reproductive Rights and Roma Access to Public Health Care.

The opinions expressed in the texts do not necessarily reflect those of the organisers of the conference.

Important to Break Social Exclusion

A PRIORITY FOR me and the Swedish 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 throughout Europe. Roma are one of Sweden’s five national minorities and Romani chib is one of Sweden’s national minority languages. Romani culture and the Romani language are an important part of Sweden’s and Europe’s common cultural heritage.

I know that Roma in Sweden and Europe have a strong will to achieve empowerment. Majority society can assist the Roma with tools to defend and strengthen themselves. There is a need for a conscious strategy and the work must move forward and be characterised by reconciliation and dialogue.

For many women in the world the daily struggle for personal survival excludes them from active participation. Gender equality is a pre-condition for democracy and central to human rights. Despite considerable progress, we still have a long way to go before we achieve gender equality. 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.

NGOs 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. Women movements play an important part in this work. They need the support and recognition that they have deserved. The basic principle is simple: all people, regardless of sex, ethnic affiliation, 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.

DESPITE THIS, FOR centuries life for Roma in Sweden – and throughout Europe – has been characterised by discrimination and exclusion. Abuses of Roma in the form of banishment, forced transportation, bans on owning businesses, bans on immigration, forced sterilisation and forced assimilation are a reality. This has led to a mistrust of the authorities among Roma.

We have a common responsibility to change this.

Since the 1960s Sweden has taken a range of actions at central and local governmental level to bring justice and improve the situation of Roma in Sweden. In 2006 the Government appointed a Delegation for Roma issues. Together, we will push nationally to improve the situation of Roma in Sweden. This work requires a close dialogue and cooperation with Roma.

It is my hope that we will be able, in dialogue, to live up to the title of today’s conference and listen to each other so that we can say with pride amare glasura ashunde!

Nyamko Sabuni
Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality, Sweden

(Excerpt from opening speech)



Photo: Pawel Flato

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A pdf of the paper and the articles can be downloaded at: <http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/574/a/102428>

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Time to Empower Roma Women

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.

It is true that the picture is not equally bleak across the continent. However, the human rights violations which I described exist; today and in Europe. Within that minority there are Roma women. In addition to all the prejudice based on their ethnicity, they suffer from discrimination and violence based on gender.

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 to

the compliance procedure under the Revised European Social Charter, as well as through other legal, protective and monitoring mechanisms.

On the specific issue of trafficking in human beings, 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. It is a legal instrument setting a framework for joint action between countries of origin, transit and destination, not only in Europe, but also in the world. 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.

The philosophy of the Council of Europe activities is that we do not work for Roma – we work with them. In order to take full advantage of the new possibilities opening up 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. 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.

Maud de Boer-Buquicchio
*Deputy Secretary
General of the
Council of Europe*

(Excerpt from opening speech)



Long Way to Equal Access to Public Health Care

ALTHOUGH WE HAVE come a long way in agreeing on norms against discrimination, and developing policies, the situation of Roma has not improved satisfactorily. The task of the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) is to collect data, conduct research, raise public awareness about fundamental rights, promote dialogue with civil society and provide advice to EU institutions and Member States.

Our reports on Romani women's rights regarding public health care have, for example, shown that in many cases Roma are still subjected to delayed care, segregation, verbal abuse and denial of services. Romani women are disproportionately affected by discriminatory treatment and have also been subjected to forced sterilisation.

Romani Women have a great role in the process of addressing discrimination. The Romani Women Networks have achieved much, by promoting advocacy and activism and sharing common concerns and values.

A number of national policies and public

health programmes highlight the existence of inequalities in access to health care services and discrimination against Roma, as well as the intention to combat these phenomena. However, 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.

It has been said on a number of occasions that the situation of Roma in Europe has become a benchmark of the EU's development in the field of fundamental rights and social justice. We now need to step up the implementation of policies and monitor their impact.

The 2005 Resolution of the European Parliament 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 sterilisation of Romani women". The Resolution urges the Fundamental Rights Agency in particular 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 that the Fundamental Rights Agency is committed to respond positively to this Resolution as is already evidenced by our work.

Constantinos Manolopoulos
*Acting Director
EU Agency for
Fundamental
Rights*

(Excerpt from opening speech)



Multiple Discrimination Plagues Romani Women

Romani women face multiple discrimination, based on both ethnic background and gender, in their own community and in society as a whole. Health care injustices, evictions and unemployment are a reality for Romani women all over Europe. The dismal list of human rights violations goes on to include forced sterilisation, extreme violence, trafficking, forced marriages, virginity testing, forced begging and drug addiction.

“BEING A ROMANI WOMAN means a necessity to be present in both the movement for Romani rights, on one hand, and the women’s rights movement, on the other,” said Enisa Eminova, a Romani women’s rights activist from Macedonia and one of the panel discussants at the workshop on Romani Women’s Rights.

Enisa Eminova pointed out that the male leaders have opened up a discussion with Romani women because they otherwise feared that “they could be manipulated by western feminist movements”. But as a Romani woman she has also experienced prejudiced views on Romani culture in the non-Romani feminist movement. “We clearly need to be present in both movements since we are Romani women and must not have to choose one identity in preference to the other,” said Enisa Eminova.

Sarita Friman-Korpela, Secretary General of the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs at the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, agreed that the exclusion of Romani is not only limited to government institutions, but also exist in the broader women’s movement, and in the human rights’ movement.

“Finnish equality institutions need to make Romani women more visible, both on their own agendas and when cooperating with Romani institutions,” she said.

KIRSTI KOLTHOFF, PRESIDENT of the European Women’s Lobby (EWL) underlined in her key-note speech that “No religious or cultural practice can ever excuse the violation of the human rights of any woman”.

“The EWL considers it essential to name, expose and condemn practices that violate women’s rights and silence women’s voices”, continued Kirsti Kolthoff.

The mission of the EWL is to achieve equality between women and men, promote women’s empowerment and eliminate all forms of violence against women.



Enisa Eminova stressed that Romani women need to be present in both the movement for Romani rights and the women’s rights movement. Thomas Hammarberg agreed with her.

The European Women’s Lobby is a non-governmental organisation established in 1990, that now brings together more than 4,000 women’s organisations from all over Europe. The International Romani Women’s Network, IRWN, is a member of the EWL.

During the workshop there was general agreement that in order to end harmful practices and discrimination within the community, Romani women must be actively involved and included. Several participants pointed out the sad fact that very few reports on problems within the Romani culture are written by Romani.

Another difficulty is that politicians and policymakers tend to ignore severe discrimina-

tion against Romani women for fear of not being seen as politically correct, since some of the problems derive from Romani traditions. But in doing so, they ignore the fact that violence and discrimination against women exist in all societies.

The situation for Roma is especially hard in Central and South-eastern Europe. Many Roma live in great poverty, lack housing, employment and education. Their health situation is severe; infant mortality is, for example, eight times higher among Roma than among the rest of the population.

In a first ever multinational project to improve the living conditions of Romani in Europe, 2005–2015 has been declared to be

“The Decade of Roma Inclusion”.

Nine governments in Central and South-eastern Europe have agreed to improve the socio-economic status and social inclusion of the Romani community. The initiative brings together governments and intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, as well as Romani civil society. The founding international partner organisations include the Council of Europe Development Bank, the World Bank, UNDP, Open Society Initiative (OSI), and the European Roma and Traveller Forum.

Tatiana Peric, an OSI international Policy Fellow in Serbia, presented her study on how Romani women’s rights have been expressed in the National Action Plans created for the Decade of Roma Inclusion. Of the nine participant countries, only Serbia had created a separate National Action Plan for Romani women. Also, Romani women organisations in Serbia participated actively in drafting the action plan. However, the action plan has yet to be adopted by the authorities.

Tatjana Peric concluded that implementation of the Roma Decade is slow. “There is an urgent need for policy developments to support the growing activism among Romani women in the Decade member states. Otherwise the Roma Decade runs a high risk of being transformed into a failed promise to Romani women,” she said.

“Most human rights watchdogs focus on the rights of all Roma, often applying a gender-blind approach to human rights violations.”

SARITA FRIMAN-KORPELA FROM Finland and Thereza Eriksson, an assistant teacher from Sweden, agreed that although the situation of Romani women in their countries is better than in many other places, they still face discrimination, particularly with regard to employment, education and everyday activities, such as being allowed to enter restaurants and shops.

Thereza Eriksson exemplified the discrimination in the labour market with Romani not being employed in schools as assistant teachers in spite of having completed a special education programme created for the purpose of working with Romani children. However, after protests, employment opportunities materialised. “We, the women, must fight for our

rights”, said Thereza Erikson and expressed her gratitude to the work of the older generation. “I am proud of the older generation. Thanks to their fight, the situation is much better than it used to be,” said Thereza Erikson.

There was general agreement during the workshop that the empowerment of Romani women is vital to combat stigmatisation and trafficking, and to challenge open as well as hidden discrimination in all societies. One of the most important tools is to include more Romani women in drafting and implementing strategies and programmes intended to promote the rights of Romani. “Most human rights watchdogs focus on the rights of all Roma, often applying a gender-blind approach to human rights violations,” concluded Tatjana Peric.

One question raised was how to involve Romani men. In view of her experience of enhancing women’s rights in general, Kirsti Kolthoff proclaimed the need for women to have their own forum for discussions and to meet Romani men who support their agenda separately. Finally Kirsti Kolthoff encouraged Romani women to “come together and organise yourselves and ask for support from other women’s networks.”

Another difficulty is that politicians and policymakers tend to ignore severe discrimination against Romani women from fear of not being seen as politically correct, since some of the problems derive from Romani traditions. But in doing this, they ignore the fact that violence and discrimination against women exist in all societies.



Kirsti Kolthoff (right) encouraged Romani women to ask for support from other women’s networks.

“WE NEED AN ANNUAL GATHERING”

“We often hear that the problems Romani women face are related to our culture and our way of life. It is not true. The problems come from the persistent discrimination in European societies. We believe that our culture is a European one, and that it has to be respected,” said Soraya Post, President of the International Romani Women’s Network (IRWN), and one of the speakers who opened the conference.

IRWN was set up four years ago and has brought together Romani women activists from 20 countries.

“We have become valid negotiators and mediators at local, national and international level. Our empowerment has been beneficial not only for us, but also for our communities. We call for full and



Soraya Post.

comprehensive equality in the societies where we live. We call for the abolition of existing laws, policies, regulations and customs that directly or indirectly discriminate against our people,” said

Soraya Post.



Miranda Vuolasranta.

Miranda Vuolasranta, Vice Chair of the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF), commented in her opening speech that IRWN has been very important for

Romani women’s rights. “But we still need to organise better and to create a common vision and action plans for future equality work.”

The latest FRA report claims that the Romani are the most disadvantaged ethnic minority in Europe.

“And most vulnerable of all are Romani women, who suffer extreme levels of discrimination”, said Miranda Vuolasranta.

Both speakers hoped that the conference would be the first of a series of annual gatherings.

“We need your support to promote this idea in your governments and I am sure international organisations will stand by us,” concluded Soraya Post.

Cooperation Necessary to Stop Trafficking

Trafficking is the modern form of worldwide slavery where human beings are traded as commodities, bought and sold over and over again. Increasingly children and women are used as beggars or to do petty crime for organised criminal groups. Women and children of Romani origin have been specially targeted by the criminal networks engaged in trafficking because of their marginalised position in society.

A RECENT REPORT from the UN agency ILO estimates that the trafficking of human beings generates USD 32 billion every year and that it is the third most profitable criminal activity in the world. But Gulnara Shahinian, an Armenian expert on counter trafficking, and one of the panellists at the workshop on trafficking, believes it is the most profitable criminal activity of all, generating more profits than the trafficking of illicit drugs and weapons. Trafficking in human beings “continues for several years and criminals use and reuse the same person over and over again, with in comparison to other crimes, limited investments,” she said.

Most people associate trafficking with sexual exploitation of women. Although this is very common, there are many other forms of trafficking. In northern Europe the trafficking of young people used for begging or petty crime is becoming increasingly common. Many victims of trafficking are exploited in several ways and minors account for a significant percentage of victims, an estimated 23 per cent in 2003 according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

“ENCOUNTERING CHILDREN THAT we think can be victims of trafficking is a new and growing phenomenon in Sweden. Many times our authorities don’t see these children as victims of trafficking – often we see them as young criminal tourists,” said Karin Norlin from the Youth Emergency Unit in Stockholm, Sweden.

These children seldom seek asylum and are instructed to avoid getting involved with the authorities. Usually they do not have any identification papers and they are often traumatised and scared – which makes it hard for them to express their need for help. “Sometimes I think we forget that the legislation that we have for children’s protection includes ALL children staying in Sweden,” continued Karin Norlin and underlined that



Gulnara Shahinian underlined that prevention is one of the most important components of anti-trafficking policy.

NGOs and authorities must cooperate across borders to stop and combat the criminal adults who use children.

As both a counter trafficking mediator in Albania and a Romani woman, Miranda Fejzo has experienced the problem at first hand, and according to her the root cause of the trafficking of Romani women and children from Albania is that they belong to the “lower segment of society” in a country suffering from a long transition from an ex-dictatorship system to a democratic system. But it is also caused by “the non-realisation of any of the national strategies for Roma inclusion.”

The Romani community is also marginalised when it comes to employment and education. “Illiteracy is still touching most of the Roma children and women. Another fact is the gender inequality inside Roma families,” continued Miranda Fejzo. “Gender inequality

and economic despair cause divorce, domestic violence and even cases where men sell their own wives and children to criminal trafficking networks.”

Another problem she pointed to is that representatives of the Romani community are rarely invited to participate in the local anti-trafficking committees. “The question is why Roma are not allowed to participate in the work that concerns us.”

GULNARA SHAHINIAN CONFIRMED that Roma and Egyptians (a small ethnic group in Albania, often called Roma) account for a substantial number of assisted victims of trafficking, and she added that trafficking does not originate from the Romani people. “The people earning the money use weak groups. We must not blame trafficking on minorities – it is a global phenomenon.”

In his key-note speech, Ambassador Anders Oljelund put trafficking into a historical perspective and compared it to slavery. "Selling and buying of human beings is nothing new. It has taken place all over the world, for a long time. It has never been abolished, like we thought slavery was two hundred years ago," said Anders Oljelund, who is the coordinator against trafficking at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Trafficking is a violation of fundamental human rights since it means taking ownership of a human being. Both Anders Oljelund and Gulnara Shahinian gave examples of the international protocols and documents that can be used to fight trafficking. Most countries have ratified the international conventions and all EU Member States are obliged to follow them. The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that governments have the obligation to protect all children; even from their parents if necessary. Children have been increasingly targeted by adults for begging and sexual exploitation. The most vulnerable are the children who are not registered, which is all too common among the marginalised groups in southern and central Europe.

"NGOs and authorities must cooperate across borders to stop and combat the criminal adults who use children."

The Palermo Protocol, which is part of a United Nations convention from 2002, states that human trafficking means that somebody has been recruited in order to exploit him or her later on. Trafficking can take place without the use of force and "it is enough to lure somebody, or to use his or her weakness or dependence."

WHEN IT COMES TO trafficking children there is no need for force or deception: "Children are of course always vulnerable because they trust adults; they must because they have no choice," said Anders Oljelund.

In working against trafficking, governments have promised to do three things: to prevent people from becoming victims of trafficking, to prosecute those who commit these crimes, and thirdly to protect those who have been used in trafficking.



»The most vulnerable are children who are not registered«, said Anders Oljelund.

"We have to realise that victims of prostitution, victims of slave-like labour or child beggars are victims and not illegal immigrants or simple prostitutes, outlaws or misbehaved children," emphasised Anders Oljelund. Gulnara Shahinian underlined that "The victims have to be treated with dignity and respect."

All panel members at the workshop agreed that prevention of trafficking, protection of victims and prosecution require better international and national cooperation. "Prevention is one of the most important components of anti-trafficking policy," said Gulnara Shahinian. There was also a general consensus about the necessity of improving the socio-economic situation in areas where poverty is the main reason for people being lured in to trafficking.

Gulnara Shahinian also pointed out that no country in the world is immune to trafficking in human beings, "be it the country of destination, origin or transit." That is why national and international cooperation is necessary.

FRA ROUNDTABLE WITH ROMANI WOMEN NETWORKS

The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) organised a Roundtable with Romani women networks the day before the start of the conference "Our Voices Heard". The aim was to initiate a debate on the conference themes and provide comments on the draft research guidelines for the upcoming FRA study on indicators measuring the implementation, protection, respect and promotion of children's rights in the EU.

The participants expressed concern about the increased anti-Roma attitudes on the part of politicians and citizens across Europe, and the inaction of some Council of Europe Member States in acknowledging and addressing the forced sterilisation of Romani women. They also noted the increasing numbers of cases of forced evictions of Roma families, especially in winter, and the inaction of central administrations in ending this illegal practice.

The unacceptably poor health status of Roma communities was a main concern of the Roundtable participants, as was the failure of governments to follow up the report "Breaking the Barriers – Romani Women and Access to Public Health Care", published in 2003, with concrete measures and programmes.

The Roundtable participants adopted 27 recommendations, which were later on echoed in the conference working groups.

Read the recommendations at:
http://fra.europa.eu/fra/index.php?fuseaction=content.dsp_cat_content&catid=3e5ce17d37410

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights"

Read about the Swedish Government's work for human rights at:

www.humanrights.gov.se



Elena Gorolova (left) and Helena Balogova were both sterilised against their will. They cannot afford to pursue their cases in court as no legal aid is available. They are now active in an NGO where sterilised women give each other support – and demand that the government publicly apologise.



THEME: RESPECTING REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Forced Sterilisation of Romani Women

Illegitimately performed sterilisations have been reported from a number of European countries. In the 1990s Sweden and Norway spent several years coming to terms with the fact that women – many of them Romani – had been forcibly sterilised for many years. The process ended with an apology from the governments of both countries.

TODAY IT IS THE turn of several other countries to face the fact that this practice has also been conducted in their countries in the past few years – and is still happening in some places even today.

“I am one of the women sterilised against my will. I have lodged a complaint with the Czech Ombudsman, but I don’t expect my case to reach court – I can’t afford to pursue my case and no legal aid is available. But I want the Ombudsman to know what happened to me. There are other ways of protecting a woman from pregnancy; methods that allow you to have a child at a later date if you so wish,” said Helena Balogova, representative of the Group of Women Harmed by Sterilisation, Czech Republic, and one of the panel discussants.

The workshop on Respect for Reproductive Rights focused entirely on illegitimately

performed sterilisations. Since 2004 the Office of the Ombudsman of the Czech Republic is deeply involved in the issue of forced sterilisations. By November 2007 the total number of complaints lodged concerning illegitimately performed sterilisations had exceeded 100. Most of them came from Romani women. The Ombudsman concluded that in none of the complaints he has received had consent been given that was without error and fully free in the human rights sense.

“This applies to all 100 cases, without exception,” commented Filip Glotzmann, Head of Office of the Czech Republic Defender of Rights, in his presentation. “Some examples of errors included the application for sterilisation being signed after the operation, the procedure being performed without consent, and consent being given under threat,” he explained.

Few of these cases will ever reach the Czech courts since no legal aid is available. But an NGO has pursued two cases and in 2007 the courts established that these two women have been sterilised without a free and informed choice. One of the women received financial compensation; in the other case the hospital had to issue a written apology.

One of the legislative proposals from the Ombudsman is that a minimum of seven days must elapse between providing information and expressing free, serious and informed consent. Other recommendations are that a handbook about the essence and implications of sterilisation be produced, and that lifelong learning of doctors on the main principles of patient’s rights be introduced. The Ombudsman also recommends that the government issue an apology and that compensation be paid to the victims.

“The most fundamental fact is that sexual sterilisation is a medical intervention causing the permanent loss of reproductive capacity,” said Filip Glotzmann.

A new law on health care in the Czech Republic was drafted in 2006 but was not approved prior to Parliamentary elections and is still pending.

IN SWEDEN, AROUND 63,000 people were sterilised between 1935 and 1975. More than 95 per cent were women. It is not known how many of them were Romani. The chief motive for introducing the 1940s sterilisation law was to prevent mentally ill and so called “feeble-minded” individuals from reproducing.

“In practice the Swedish law was used as a means of ‘cleansing and purifying’ society from unwanted problems. The common denominator of these women was the fact that they were dependent on public support and that they were considered to be, or likely to become, ‘bad mothers,’” explained Maija Runcis, Associate Professor of History at Södertörn University College, Sweden.

The Swedish law prohibited the use of physical force, and in actual fact some 90–95 per cent of the persons sterilised in 1935–1975 signed their own applications.

“From a legal point of view, these are voluntary operations. But on the other hand, the institutions and physicians used varying forms of persuasion and indirect coercion, thus eliminating free will for those sterilised,” said Maija Runcis.

IN NORWAY THE Romani have been subjected to a tough assimilation policy as well as forced sterilisation. Methods that were used well into the 1970s included children being forcibly removed from their families, and families being placed in work camps designed to adjust them to a settled lifestyle.

“Making up for previous discrimination is a long process,” explained Tove Skotvedt, Senior Adviser at the Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion.

In the early 1990s the Ministry of Social and Health Affairs commissioned the Norwegian Research Council to conduct a major research project. The report was published in 2000 and estimates that more than 300 female Romani were illegally sterilised from the 1930s into the 1970s. The Norwegian Government has apologised and has set up collective and individual compensation schemes for the previous violations of the Romani people in Norway.

“The Norwegian experience shows that we need a public ‘watchdog’ that can sound the alarm when the situation so requires. We also need governments that are ready to investigate

allegations, acknowledge wrongdoing and apologise. Such a process is necessary in order to re-establish confidence,” underlined Tove Skotvedt.

During the discussion it was underlined that sterilisation is never an acute and pressing treatment – a few days or weeks for the decision should therefore always be allowed. National and international legislation also set out special conditions for its performance to guarantee that the intervention is performed with free and informed consent.

Several participants underlined that reports about forced sterilisations still being performed are coming from Slovakia, for example. In Hungary the state recently lost a case (A.S. v. Hungary) concerning a woman who was sterilised 17 minutes after being admitted for delivery. She had given her signed consent, but the court ruled that this does not prove that the consent was free and well-informed. The time that had lapsed after she was admitted was too short to guarantee that she was in any condition to make such a crucial decision.

“We need governments that are ready to investigate allegations, acknowledge wrongdoing and apologise.”

THE VICTIMS OF sterilisation often feel shame, and because they are reluctant to talk about what has happened, they do not get the help and support they need.

“I had no idea that other women had suffered the same thing as me. It made us all feel stronger to realise that we were not alone, that we did not have to hide and be ashamed,” said Elena Gorolova, spokesperson of the Group of Women Harmed by Sterilisation, Czech Republic.

The organisation was formed in 2003 and the women meet once a month to discuss their situation and to give each other support. They have also organised demonstrations and put together a photo exhibition. The organisation aims to inform doctors, patients and the general public about forced sterilisation. They demand that the government publicly apologise to the victims, and they demand compensation.

“In the beginning it was hard to speak about it, to give media interviews and to be photographed. But as time went by it felt more and more important to be frank and talk about it. It gave us energy and we want to make sure that this does not happen to our daughters,” said Elena Gorolova.

DELEGATION FOR ROMA ISSUES

In the autumn of 2006, the Swedish Government set up the Delegation for Roma Issues with the task of improving the situation of Roma people in Sweden. Counteracting discrimination and breaking social, political and economic exclusion requires close dialogue and cooperation with the Roma community.

One of its first tasks is to conduct an inquiry into the situation of Roma in Sweden. The Delegation will also promote and support municipal projects and services aimed at improving the situation of the Roma and spread knowledge and information about the Roma. In partnership with government agencies, organisations and Roma representatives, the Delegation will also arrange conferences and seminars, take part in international cooperation on Roma issues and examine the need and scope for building up Roma institutions.

The Delegation consists of ten members, half of whom are of Roma origin. A number of experts and a broad reference group consisting of representatives of Roma associations have also been appointed and will be consulted on a continuous basis. A final report is to be presented to the Government in December 2009, together with a proposal for how work to improve the situation of Roma is to continue.

Sweden has five national minorities: the Jews, the Roma, the Sami, the Swedish Finns and the Tornedalers. In 1999, the Swedish Parliament approved ratification of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. A minorities policy was adopted in 2000.

For further information:
www.romadelegationen.se



Health Care – Without Care

Shorter life spans, high infant mortality, low access to health care, ambulances that do not arrive when called for. In many countries in Europe, Romani people receive poorer health care than the rest of the population. In Romania, however, a project using health mediators has vastly improved the situation.

“**ACCESS TO HEALTH** care is a fundamental human right, but in some countries Romani women have a life span that is 14 years shorter than for other women, and infant mortality is almost twice as high,” said keynote speaker Nicoleta Bitu, from the organisation Romani Criss in Romania.

Romani Criss receives reports from all over Europe and Nicoleta Bitu is often shocked by what she reads.

“It was unbelievable to see that in Italy and France there are refugee camps where Romani from Macedonia and Kosovo live under incredibly difficult conditions. We know of countries where Romani children have not been vaccinated for 20 years, where there are specially segregated maternity wards for Romani women and areas with no health services for Romani at all.”

During the workshop Savelina Danova from the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), presented the organisation’s report “Ambulance Not on the Way: The Disgrace of Health Care for Roma in Europe.”

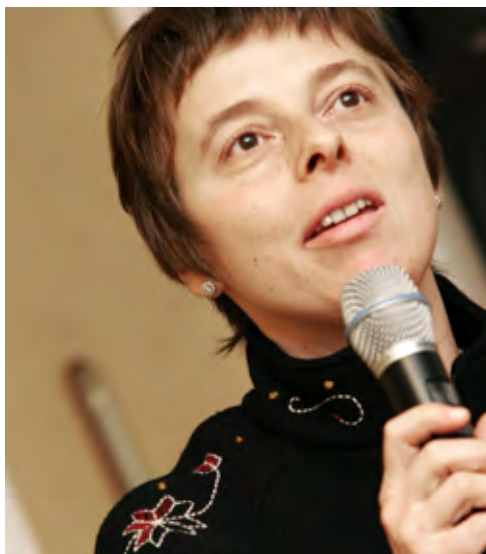
“There is evidence that in many instances Romani patients receive a lower standard of health care than others,” said Savelina Danova and emphasised that Romani rights organisations need to demand that governments respect their human rights commitments.

OBSTACLES THAT PREVENT Roma from accessing health care are often of a systemic nature. For example, unemployment and a lack of citizenship or personal documents mean exclusion from health insurance coverage and no access to social assistance. Segregation and geographical isolation make it even more difficult to get adequate care.

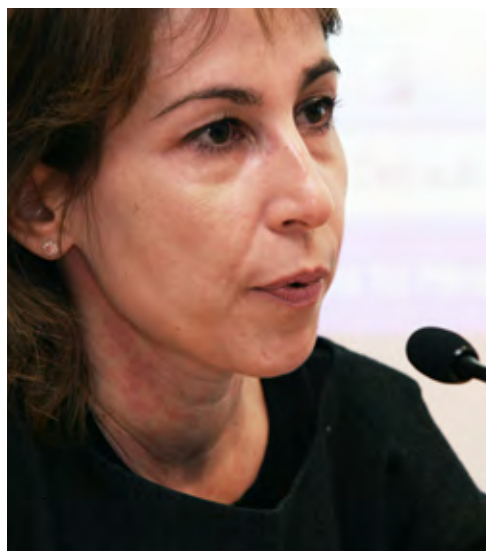
“In Bulgaria, for example, according to official estimates in 2004, 46 per cent of Roma are not covered by health insurance,” explained Savelina Danova.

Romani women are particularly vulnerable because they are even more disadvantaged than the men as far as education and employment are concerned.

“Women are especially vulnerable during pregnancy and childbirth. Alleged negligent



Hanna Dobronauteanu, responsible at the Ministry of Public Health for the successful system of health mediators in Romania.



The health care for Roma in Europe is a disgrace, according to Savelina Danova from the European Roma Rights Center.

treatment of Romani women has caused death and serious health damage in a number of instances documented by the ERRC in, for example, Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania. Women also suffer from inadequate protection against domestic violence,” Savelina Danova pointed out.

DISCRIMINATION CAN BE overt and very harsh. In a number of countries, there are widespread reports by Roma about being denied access to emergency assistance.

“In 2004, research in Hungary found that 40 per cent of the Roma who live in segregated settlements experienced the denial of an ambulance visit,” she noted.

Bulgaria, Greece and Italy have been found in recent years to be in violation of the Revised European Social Charter due to a failure to undertake effective measures to improve the situation of many Roma who live in inadequate housing and are subjected to forced evictions and segregated housing. The ERRC has documented the exposure of Romani communities to environmental hazards in countries including Germany, France, Kosovo and Slovakia.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights demands that states parties ensure that the principle of non-discrimination in access to health care has an immediate effect.

“This means that states have a special obligation to undertake positive action to provide the most vulnerable with health insurance and health care facilities,” commented Savelina Danova.

She presented a list of actions that need to be taken by European Governments, including revision of legislation which is found to have a unequal impact on Roma and other vulnerable groups, regular assessment of the impact of health and social policies on groups threatened by social exclusion, targeted positive action and investments in health care provision in areas with a high Romani population. Special mechanisms for monitoring discrimination are also necessary.

“Targeted actions to involve Romani people

“Our long term goal is that mediators shall not be needed at all. The needs of the most vulnerable groups must be mainstreamed in all policy development.”

as employees in the health sector can make a difference, and anti-discrimination training must be offered to public and private health care providers,” concluded Savelina Danova.

IN ROMANIA A SYSTEM of health mediators has improved health care provision for Roma. The health mediators are Romani women, who have received training to function as interpreters between Romani patients and health care staff.

The system was introduced through a project by the NGO Romani Criss in 1993. In 2001 it expanded as the Government introduced a Strategy and Action Plan to improve the situation of Roma. Today there are almost 600 health mediators, all financed by the Ministry of Health. All 42 counties in Romania now have health mediators.

“The basis for this success is that Romani culture and traditions have been respected and the commitment of the Romani representatives has been strong,” explained Hanna Dobronauteanu, former Adviser to the Romanian Minister of Health.

The results are very good. The proportions of vaccinated children in communities with health mediators have increased from between 20 and 68 per cent to between 90 and 100 per cent. Infant mortality has dropped to zero in several communities, in some of the worst areas the figure was almost 48 per cent before,” explained Hanna Dobronauteanu.

“Most noticeable is the positive change in the perception of Roma shown by health care staff. The Romani communities also show an increased desire to work and participate in society. In the long run I am sure this will lead to a positive change in the general view of the Romani population,” said Hanna Dobronauteanu.

One important side effect is the jobs that are created for Roma women in their communities.

“This leads to women’s voices being heard and shows that they are respected members of the community who actively create profound changes,” underlined Hanna Dobronauteanu.

Nicoleta Bitu, from Romani Criss, agreed that the health mediators project has been a great success and pointed out that mediators are needed in other areas as well. But she warned that if the method becomes permanent, its effects could lead to increased segregation:

“Our long-term goal is for mediators not to be needed at all. The needs of the most vulnerable groups must be mainstreamed in all policy development,” was Nicolata Bitu’s message to the governments of Europe.

“SHE CHANGED SWEDISH SOCIETY”

“Huge problems still haunt the Romani people in Europe and their lack of influence ensures that the voices of the Romani people are not heard.”

Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, has fought injustices and protested about discrimination against the Romani people for many years. He was a close friend of author Katarina Taikon, born in 1932 in Sweden, who let her voice be heard in a number of books about the Roma in Sweden.

Katarina Taikon grew up as Nazism and Fascism spread across Europe. In Sweden the Romani were chased from place to place and their children were prevented from attending school. Katarina Taikon did not start school until she was 26. But she soon started to write books that described and explained Romani culture and customs. “Her importance to the Romani community and to justice and understanding is an enormous contribution to our country. She changed and opened the Swedish society,” said Thomas Hammarberg.



Thomas Hammarberg.

Another of her important contributions was to highlight the situation of the Romani people in Sweden during the Mayday demonstrations in 1966. She and others brought signs that said “We want to go to school” and “We want to live in houses”.

“The other demonstrators were shocked to discover that a group in Sweden lived under such harsh conditions – there was not much awareness of this. And the first time I heard about forced sterilisation in Sweden was when Katarina Taikon talked about it,” recalled Thomas Hammarberg.

Katrina Taikon wrote a series of autobiographical youth books about Katitzi; books

that are still read all over Sweden and still play a vital role in explaining Romani culture.

“She had the courage to talk about a culture that was not respected. Much has changed since she died in 1995, and I wish she could see it. I am positive that if she had lived today, she would have worked internationally and tried to improve the situation of Romani people all over Europe,” concluded Thomas Hammarberg.



Katarina Taikon was an activist for Romani rights, and she is one of Sweden’s most beloved authors of children’s books. The first book in her series about Katitzi, for the first time translated into Romani, has just been released. Katarina Taikon was hospitalised after suffering a cardiac arrest in 1982. She died in 1995.

What did you think about the conference?



MAIJA RUNCIS, Associate Professor in History, Centre for Baltic and East European Studies, Södertörn University College, Sweden:

In a way, the conference was an eye-opener for me as it showed the lack of human rights for Romani women from Eastern European countries. The switch from totalitarianism to democracy and membership of the EU seem to have strengthened exclusion, as well as to have created new repressive methods against unwanted social groups – for example the lack of access to health care and social security. The responsibility of the state towards these groups seems to be very weak and needs to be stressed more in public debate. How is it possible for democratic countries to be so repressive towards the Romani people, and especially Romani women? For me that was a new experience.



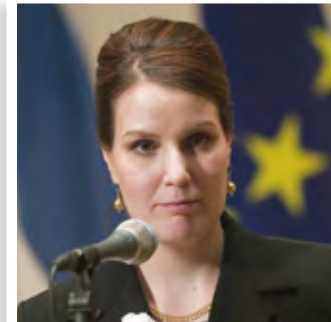
REMZIYE UMUNC, Edirne Roma Association (EDROM), Turkey:

I think the most important aspect of the conference is the gathering of Roma women from different countries and backgrounds. We hardly ever find this kind of opportunity. Also I'm glad that we talked about discrimination of Roma women and how to combat this. Finally, I'm happy to have met women activists from Roma NGOs. We only have a few women activists in the Roma community in Turkey. I hope we can provide more participation from Turkey at the next conference.



THEREZA ERIKSSON, Romani Studies Institute (RSI), and International Roma Women Network (IRWIN), Sweden:

As a Romani woman from Sweden I was, and am, very proud that the conference was held in my country. I hope that the 2008 conference will be held somewhere else, in order to allow different countries to act as host. I think that the conference lived up to its name – “Our Voices Heard” – but I also hope that the result will be “Our Voices Remembered”. Since I work on Romani women rights issues I was familiar with most of what was said, but it was an important opportunity to meet, talk, listen and discuss what needs to be done nationally and internationally in the future. Because there is much to be done – and big structural changes are certainly needed. We strive for better cooperation between Roma and the authorities at all levels – the local, municipal, national and international levels must be involved.



SARITA FRIMAN-KORPELA, Senior Officer at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, working as Secretary General of the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs, Finland:

The most important thing was probably bringing people together. The topics were interesting. In the future, however, it would be very valuable to link people from different countries, who work on similar issues concerning the Roma. For example: during this conference I raised the issue of Romani people begging in the streets – a topic currently being discussed in Finland. This is a common phenomenon in many countries, and several participants had experience of the matter. We discussed how different authorities have dealt with it, how the Roma feel about it, if it is right to take small children into custody etc. This discussion has been an asset to me. In future conferences I would like working groups to come up with practical solutions that serve participants in their work.

I personally appreciated the Swedish Government's high level of involvement during the conference. It is always an added value when a government shows genuine interest in Romani matters.

The set up of the conference was one of a kind. The practical arrangements worked well, the Lejondal Castle was very inspiring and I can't remember another event when the conference food – or food in general – was so great."

“I think the name of the conference: “Our Voices Heard” was fulfilled – but I also hope that it will entail: “Our Voices Remembered”.



On their way to the next meeting.



Lunch on the veranda.



The singer Hans Caldaras performed after dinner.



Lejondal's Castle.