



**The way forward to the International Roma Women's Conference  
Organised by the Council of Europe and the Finnish Government  
Technical Meeting  
Council of Europe (Agora Building), Strasbourg  
Friday 15 June 2012**

**Participants:**

- **Mrs Hannele SYRJÄ**  
Senior Officer- Advisory Board on Romani Affairs  
Ministry of Social Affairs and Health - Finland
- **Ms Miranda VUOLASRANTA**  
Senior Adviser, Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Finland
- **Ms Mihaela ZATREANU**  
Director, Centrul National de Cultura a Romilor - ROMANO KHER
- **Ms Isabela MIHALACHE**, Independent expert, Romania
- **Ms Gordana HEROLD**, Romnialution, Germany
- **Ms Norica COSTACHE**, International Roma Women Network (IRWN)
- **Mr Jeroen SCHOKKENBROEK**, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues, Council of Europe
- **Ms Eleni TSETSEKOU**, Administrator, Support Team of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues, Council of Europe
- **Ms Cathie BURTON**, Media Officer/Spokesperson on Roma, Directorate of Communication, Council of Europe
- **Ms Johanna NELLES**, Administrator, Directorate of Justice and Human Dignity, Gender Equality and Violence Against Women
- **M. Robert RUSTEM**, Secretariat of the European Roma and Travellers Forum

**Aims of the meeting**

**The Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues, Mr Jeroen Schokkenbroek**, introduced the aims of the present meeting:

- To pursue discussions already started in Grenada between different stakeholders such as the Roma women (Isabella Mihalache, Enisa Eminovska), the Finnish Advisory Board on Romani Affairs (Sarita Freeman-Korpela), the Romanian Government (Mihaela Zatreanu) and the Council of Europe, in

- particular on the need for an inclusive consultation process leading up to the 2013 Conference.
- To define the process towards the International Conference of Roma Women in Finland. The aim is to achieve something more meaningful and strategic, not just a one-off event.
  - The purpose of the Conference is not to organise civil society. Hopefully one of the effects will be the stimulation and reinforcement of the Roma women's movement. It is not the role of the Council of Europe to establish civil society networks or to judge if a network exists or not.
  - The Council of Europe has no tradition in providing grants. Political support for empowerment yes, and this is what we are actually doing. It is not for the Council of Europe to say we are going to support one network or another. In this process every organised movement has a place.
  - The Conference should lead to proposals, agreements and recommendations to all kinds of stakeholders: Governments, Roma women's organisations, general Roma organisations and the European Institutions (CoE, EU, OSCE/ODHIR). We should think of channels to use after the Conference and follow up, such as a CAHROM discussion on the results of the Conference, possibly a meeting of governments on Roma women etc. (follow up could be an item of the agenda of the preparatory meeting in Romania).
  - Technically speaking, the Conference is organised by the Council of Europe and the Finnish Government.

### Organising the consultation process

**The Finnish Government represented by Hannele Syrjä and Miranda Vuolasranta** highlighted that this kick-off meeting is a technical one on the practical arrangements of the Conference and on the first steps to be taken towards the preparatory meeting which will be taking place in Romania following the invitation of the Romanian Government.

The strategic project plan for the Finnish Government is to end up with a European Action Plan for Roma Women. Having a strong Roma women's movement is a prerequisite to negotiating a European Strategy on Roma Women with stakeholders.

**Based on lessons learnt from previous conferences, the Roma Women Conference in Finland should lead to the empowerment of the Roma Women both at national and European level. The aim of the conference is to elaborate a basis for defining the long term objectives and developing the European Action Plan for Roma Women. The questionnaire and the request for a background paper on the situation of Roma women in every country, to be prepared by the Finnish Government (through the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs and Council for Gender Equality), will provide the opportunity for national Roma women NGOs to be consulted and to**

**define the themes of the meeting.** The Finnish proposal for the questionnaire and background paper aims to reach as many as possible Roma women organizations, networks, experts and individuals.

The idea is to present the results of the questionnaire and the background paper during the preparatory meeting in Bucharest in order to obtain a clear picture of priorities and to decide on the themes of the Conference. The purpose is to have a broad consultation process.

The Romanian National Center of Roma Culture (Mihaela Zatreanu) in cooperation with the Romanian Institute of Research (Quality Life) could provide technical assistance to the Finnish Government in order to set the parameters of the questionnaire and obtain clear replies. They will also take care of the translation of the questionnaire into Romani. They will also explore the possibility of collecting and analysing the results.

During the meeting, participants made several comments and suggestions on the draft questionnaire and the request for background paper.

### Permanent Expert Group on Roma Women Issues?

To ensure future monitoring and implementation of the outcomes of the Conference, as well as follow up between Conferences, the Finnish representatives suggested to the Council of Europe to establish a permanent Roma women working group. It is important to mention that Roma women's issues are absent from the UN (CEDAW) reports mentioned and that working with mainstream women's networks is essential in order to promote Roma women's issues.

Jeroen Schokkenbroek expressed doubts whether this would be feasible from a budgetary point of view. We could develop cooperation within/between the CAHROM or the Gender Equality Commission to address this issue as we have a coordinating approach now and could create cooperation with other parts of the Council of Europe

**Isabela Mihalache recalled** that the discussion on how the civil society should be involved had already started in Granada. **The consultation should be constant, consistent and substantial.** It is clear that the Council of Europe or the Finnish Government cannot and should not organise the civil society. One of the criticisms on international institutions has been the fact that they take the lead in organising Romani women. Because of that, current criticism has to consider whether we want to let international organisations do the same.

So far, the Council of Europe has taken the responsibility to keep Romani women's issues on the agenda of Governments through organising International Romani Women's Conferences together with interested governments. The Finnish government has agreed to organise the 2013 international conference. The problem with this scenario is that there is very little done in between these conferences in

terms of implementation of initiatives or policy work and I think because nobody owns takes responsibility over this process. I think the CoE has to consider whether they want to lead this process and take some responsibility for what happens in between these conferences also.

As for the conference in Finland, who is going to take the lead so that important things do not fall out of the process? I believe the Finnish government will want mainly to organise the conference. If the case, the Finnish government has to decide whether the aim of the conference is to strengthen Romani women movements or to create a political process? I would say both. I think the role of these conferences is the ensure wide participation of Romani women and to make sure that what it is discussed and agreed on during the Conference is taken forward by someone else. It means that on the one hand a group of people takes this as an additional task and works with different actors to promote the results of the Conference. It also means that the Finnish government (and follow up organising governments) should engage with the Council of Europe and the EC during the preparation period of the conference to create a political commitment for initiatives on capacity building and empowerment resulting from a broad consultation of civil society and and later from conclusions of conferences. This is why we should add another point on the agenda, which is lobby/negotiations with international stakeholders (EC and others) between January and May 2012 led by the Council of Europe and the Finnish government.

For the purpose of transparency and consultation, the Council of Europe could consider having a conference web page, for posting information of the preparation process, the questionnaires and relevant documents etc. It can also host a forum for consultations.

**Mrs Nora Costache** underlined that measuring from one conference to another what has been done (not necessarily positive) is a healthy process. Another aspect is that the preparatory meeting in Romania is timely as there are elections at the moment, and a need to keep the Roma women issue on the domestic agenda. It is a good opportunity to campaign for the Roma population and to promote messages. In Romania, some Roma women are already candidates at both local level and in mainstream parties, and so maybe this will reinforce the impact for the Roma women.

### **Preparatory Meeting in Romania (Bucharest)**

**Mihaela Zatreanu** recalled the discussions in Grenada on an inclusive consultation process and the offer of her Government, through the Institute of Roma Culture, to host the preparatory meeting. Various consultation channels could lead to an inclusive consultation process: the online network of Romnialution, the questionnaire to be answered by active Roma women, teleconferences etc. Involving Romania in

the process brings added value as one more Government gets interested in the issue. **The suggested dates for the preparatory meeting in Bucharest are (5-6 October).**

The fact that one European institution like the Council of Europe is bringing forward the Roma women's agenda is very important since it provides the strongest support, which is necessary to become stronger and independent. We pay attention to all organisations, to every single woman. You cannot exclude other networks.

### Presentation of the Romnialution critical analysis

**Gordana Herlod:** Romnialution intends to build up and organise the Roma women's conferences in order to include as many participants as possible. For the Conference in Finland, Romnialution would like as many women as possible to be included in the preparation and that the process will be transparent. A Preparatory Committee should be established on a European level, as well as systems and structures allowing Roma women from the settlements to have a say in the organisation of this Conference with the help of the network/committee and the Council of Europe.

Although the idea of Romnialution existed already in the Roma Women's Conference in Greece, it was established after the conference in Spain. It was a reaction to certain women being unhappy with the conferences organised so far. They wanted to change things. Since Spain, the Facebook platform has 2,000 members. It is not a registered network yet, but there are plans to legally register it. In view of the Finland Conference, the Romnialution requests support to participate in the process and would like to work for the establishment of structures. Romnialution wants to have an inclusive process. It does not want just another conference, but rather a meeting with strategic objectives as mentioned by the Finns (European Plan for Roma Women) with the aim of strengthening the capacity of Roma Women. Romnialution believes that IRWN does not exist.

**Miranda Vuolasranta:** there is a basic misunderstanding of the role of the Council of Europe which has never financed any Roma women's network, supported activities etc. In 2003, Roma women became mobilised and started campaigning at international level with the forced sterilisation cases. Finally, in 2011/2012, the European Court of Human Rights issued judgments on forced sterilization against Slovakia. In two conferences, forced sterilization was on the agenda and Roma women victims were present and spoke about their painful experiences. If Roma women's networks or any other forms of activism are active and want to build a project, they could apply for financing from the EU or other sources. The Conference could be a good basis for future projects financed by international organisations, therefore we should find the right platform to promote the results of the Conference.

## Participants

The Finnish Government has estimated the capacity to organise a conference of 60 to 80 participants from abroad **including the self-financed participants**. In addition there will be 50-60 Finnish Roma women and other domestic participants.

On the issue of the participation of governmental experts, it was agreed that we should stick to the format agreed at the beginning and to keep the emphasis on Roma Women. It would be wiser to organise follow up discussion with governments where the conclusions and recommendations of the Conference will be put forward (e.g CAHROM thematic discussion, Gender Equality Commission, joint event with other international organisations, agencies (European Commission, FRA, OSCE/ODIHR, European Platform for Roma Integration).

## Next Steps

- The questionnaires and the replies will be technically handled by the Romanian and Finnish Authorities. The dissemination of the questionnaires will be ensured by all possible online networks (Roma Virtual Network, Romnialution, IRWN contact list, list of participants of all previous Roma Women Conferences etc.) and online on the internet site of the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs in Finland and the Council of Europe. The overall operation will be supervised by the Finnish Government. By the end of June, the revised version of the questionnaire based on the comments made at the present meeting will be ready. A final consultation with the group will then follow and in July the questionnaire will be made public. The request for the background paper will be sent out to Roma Women NGOs at the same time as the questionnaire. **The sending out of these is planned for the beginning of July with a deadline for submission of responses on 10th September.**

In the meeting the draft request for background paper was discussed and modified. The delivery of the Background paper was left open in the meeting for further discussion. Actually it was decided to send separately later on. Because of the early dates for the preparatory meeting in Romania the deadline for Background papers as described above is too tight as it takes time to prepare the paper. The deadline should be earliest in the end of September. Anyhow the first step to take could be sending the request to Roma women NGOs and then for further elaboration to national authorities like focal points on gender equality and/or via CAHROM. The Roma women organizations and networks should be encouraged to co-operate and to prepare one country report if possible.

The information at national level might be gathered by a focal point. One option could be the Council of Europe's focal point on gender equality in

cooperation with the national Roma women associations. The results of the background paper request could constitute a shadow report alongside the official reports submitted to international organisations by the Governments. At a later stage, the background papers could be requested through the CAHROM meeting (to be discussed at the November meeting).

- **Internet Site of the Conference:** the Council of Europe will work on a specific internet page for the Roma Women Conference in Finland, with a Forum of discussion to which all interested partners will have access. The Support Team of the SRSG will explore the technical details with the Communication Directorate of the Council of Europe. The internet site should be available after the preparatory meeting in Bucharest.
- **Preparatory meeting and participation** (5-6 October 2012, Bucharest): the replies to the questionnaires will form the basis of the discussions in Bucharest. In addition the Bucharest meeting should explore the possibilities of organising **teleconference (remote participation)** at the Finnish conference with all interested Roma Women NGOs in Member States in order to allow Roma women to bring their ideas based on the national reality. For practical reasons, the option of a small scale meeting (similar to the present one) enlarged with a limited number of specific experts (technical expertise on remote participation, substantive expertise on gender equality) was retained.
- **Budgetary questions were discussed briefly.** It was decided to continue the discussions about the costs of the conference (like travelling and accommodation, interpretation and communication expenses) to be covered and divided between Council of Europe and the Finnish Government.
- **Conference:** May or September 2013 (Helsinki); to be confirmed depending on the dates of other CoE meetings.