

6th International Roma and Traveller Women Conference
“Women and Political Representation: The Case of Roma and Traveller Women”
6-7 November 2017, Palais de l’Europe, room 9
Statement by Rita Izsák-Ndiaye

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I am very happy and honored to participate in this 6th International Roma Woman Conference and see many friends whom I haven’t had the chance to meet since our 4th international meeting in Finland.

The topic of our 2-day discussion is political participation of Romani women and although we will focus mainly on local, national and European Parliaments and legislative bodies, we should keep in mind that today there are diverse platforms where ordinary citizens’ activities affect politics and the disappearing borderline between political and nonpolitical societal spheres stimulates various new forms of participation. Speaking up publicly on social media, taking part in flash mobs, casting a vote, joining a demonstration, signing a petition, or volunteering to support an electoral candidate are all examples of such activities. Roma and Traveller women should be encouraged to consider taking part in such actions too.

I have been invited here in my capacity as an independent UN expert who has been extensively travelling to look at the situation of minorities globally and share the lessons and good practices learnt from other regions and countries that we could apply to the case of Romani women in the CoE area. I must say that there are very few countries with well-established systems of minority representation. India is one of them where there are reserved seats for scheduled castes or Cyprus in Europe where apart from Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots, the Maronites, the Armenians and the Latins all have at least one seat secured in the Parliament. However, minorities can be terribly underrepresented even in well-established democracies. In the United States of America, there have been 1,970 members of the United States Senate, but only ten have been African American, and only 2 out of them were women. When I visited Brazil in 2014, I was truly shocked to learn that in the 81-member Senate, there was only one man who was Black despite the fact that today, Afro-Brazilians constitute a numerical majority with 51% of the population. If we look at it from the other angle, from gender perspectives, there are also serious gaps. There are only 11 countries in the world with more than 40% of women representation¹ and altogether two countries, namely in Rwanda and Bolivia, where it is 61% and 53% respectively.

I believe that our challenge today in establishing true and functioning inclusive societies with Roma and Romani women participation in political and public life is not of a legal nature. Every multilateral organization and international human rights monitoring body has issued standards and guidelines on how to ensure minority

¹ Rwanda, Bolivia, Cuba, Iceland, Nicaragua, Sweden, Mexico, Finland, South Africa, Senegal, Namibia

inclusion in politics, including OSCE's Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life in 1999, through the recommendations of the UN Forum on Minority Issues, under my guidance of the past six years, until the most recent Saint Petersburg Declaration of the Inter-Parliamentary Union on interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue which was adopted by more than 1500 parliamentarians from 155 countries during the last General Assembly only two weeks ago, and which I had the privilege to attend as a keynote speaker. As you heard from Secretary General Jagland, there are various commitments, recommendations and resolutions on women's political participation for Council of Europe Member States too.

So governments and political parties know what they should be doing. Various models exist and have been tried during the years and good practices are known in every region.

The challenges we have in front of us today are rather political and personal. And if we do not tackle these, we will continue encountering serious problems. My time will not permit to go through all of them but let me highlight a few key issues here.

Among the political challenges is the often problematic approach to Roma issues in various political platforms. And what better place to talk about political ideologies than right here in France which is where the political terms "Left" and "Right" were first used during the French Revolution. Right-wing parties in general hold that certain social orders and hierarchies are inevitable and natural, even desirable, and they do this referring to natural law, economics or tradition. So if they decide to engage with Roma, they will prefer to work together with some selected intellectual Roma individuals and use tokenism to demonstrate that by hard work and good behavior it is indeed almost automatic that one gets higher in the social ladder.

Left-wing politicians support social equality and egalitarianism and are usually concerned about disadvantaged communities with the belief that there are unjustified inequalities that need to be tackled. And, therefore, left wing parties would be the natural allies. Unfortunately, they often treat Roma in a rather paternalistic way believing that they are a bunch of a needy people in poverty who must be uplifted and they often have difficulties to forge real partnerships with those who come from a well-educated and strong middle class background. So we are left with far less than ideal choices. Do we accept to join a party where we might be the only Roma face and be used to support the argument that everything is possible only depending on our own personal efforts and be pressured to deny existing forms of structural and institutional racism or we get ourselves into an eternal struggle of trying to take out the Roma issue of the poverty paradigm and place it into the rights context with clear obligations on States?

I personally believe that no matter how hard it seems and it is indeed in reality, we can only change things from within inside and we must engage with a wide range of players in the political world. I remember when I once had a discussion with MEP Livia Járóka's team about 10 years ago in Brussels when I felt fatigue of EU politics and I asked them how they can survive in such a politicized environment and a colleague responded that this is the beauty of it. To learn the rules of the game from inside and then figure out how to make them work for our cause. I thought about it

since and I must agree with her after I had to deal with many, often incredibly complex, complicated and sensitive political matters as an independent UN expert, something that I could not have anticipated before.

So I encourage all of us in this room to get into this game of politics, the house of cards, learn the rules, play the cards well and never lose focus on how we can use them to benefit our constituency and change the status quo.

The other challenges are personal. They are both external and internal. External when they come from outside. When we, Roma women are treated with suspicion, reservation, doubt, prejudice, when our loyalty, professionalism and preparedness is constantly questioned. And such encounters are not even unique for Roma women or minority women but indeed affect women in general. I know that many of you also identify as feminists so you will be familiar with all the relevant researches. The blunt truth is that men still make the most important decisions in the world. Last night I was reading a book from Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, who explains how women face real obstacles in the professional world, including blatant and subtle sexism, discrimination and sexual harassment. Too few workplaces offer the flexibility and access to child care and parental leave that are necessary for pursuing a career while raising children. She writes about how men have an easier time finding the mentors and sponsors who are invaluable for career progression. And women have to prove themselves to a far greater extent than men do. And all this hits Romani women harder whose networks of support might be narrower and their ability for self-advocacy hindered by the lower status that they are often assigned to compared to majority women.

Unfortunately, personal challenges are also internal. We, women, especially minority women who are often born and suffer of an inferiority complex build barriers that exist within ourselves. We tend to lack self-confidence, we are often easily discouraged to raise our hands and voices and express our opinions, we internalize negative criticism, we are afraid of being labelled as bad women if we happen to travel and stay in hotel rooms alone, we fear to be labelled as becoming like men by being outspoken, clear or strict, claiming our power and assigned responsibilities. We are scared that if we don't give birth to children or enough children, we will not be regarded as real Roma women. We compromise our career goals to take care of our family members, from young to old. Moreover, we always strive to be nice and caring because these are the qualities that society expects from us. But this is a trap. Because if we behave professionally and efficiently, we will be regarded as too competitive, not very good to work with or just not seem nice enough. If we are indeed kind and nice and understanding, we will be considered weak and not enough competent. So we often choose the sacrifice to try to be liked than being considered successful.

Our tasks ahead are manifold. First of all, we need to work closer with parliamentarians and political parties, I am glad that some are here with us, and call their attention to a number of important measures that they should take in order to protect the rights of Roma and include more Roma and Traveller women in the field of legislation, policy-making and education. They should recognize that parliamentarians with their diverse constituencies have the real potential to be the natural sentinels of peace and tolerance. They can decide to actively reach out and

include members of Roma communities into their parties and by working closely together, they can have better chances to win their trust and cooperation. They can initiate and incorporate social debate through parliamentary discussions and decisions. They can work together with various public and opinion leaders to promote human rights and tolerance and prevent tensions that could lead to violence. Moreover, by exercising their budgetary oversight capacity, they could prevent the funding of projects and organizations that promote hatred and intolerance. Almost every Parliament has a multiparty committee dealing with diversity, pluralism, minority issues or human rights, they should be encouraged after this meeting to hold a public hearing of Romani women and make a pledge on how to improve their situation with their direct participation and involvement.

Apart from legislative bodies, efforts must be taken for Roma women to be included in all decision-making processes, including in municipal and government structures, law enforcement bodies, the judiciary, criminal justice systems and all other relevant bodies and mechanisms, especially when their decisions affect Roma. Without their participation, such bodies are less able to take vital decisions for the benefit of the entire society and may be less trusted by Roma, who may be reluctant to access them, or discouraged from doing so.

Then we need to create support groups for Roma women in the form of training, mentorship, career advising and peer networking and I am glad that a session is dedicated tomorrow to this topic. We must identify ways of encouraging Roma women to get into the world of politics, to help them understand its importance and benefits together with the challenges, to arm them with all the necessary tools and right attitudes to survive and overcome difficult situations, to build their self-confidence so they are strong and vocal enough to stand up for the interests of their constituencies, and to establish support for them in balancing their career with the family duties at their homes. It sounds a lot and difficult but I trust that in the course of the coming 1.5 days, we will find ways and solutions to continue our joint walk on this long road of establishing full equality of Roma women in rights and dignity.

Thank you.