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“Roma women are the best defenders of their own rights”

Keynote speech by

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It has been said that Roma women are often double or even triple discriminated. Sadly, this is true - and a shame for the societies where they live.

However, women in the Roma communities are not only victims. Many of them are strong, forceful personalities whom deserve our respect and admiration. Some of them are in the forefront against repression and anti-Gypsism. They are human rights defenders in their world.

One of them was Katarina Taikon who was born in Sweden 1932. That was a time when Nazism was beginning to spread all over Europe and the situation for Roma people deteriorated even further.

Sweden was no exception. Katarina's family had to move from place to place, nowhere were they welcome to stay more than a couple of days. They lived from performing music and organising entertainment through a mobile "tivoli".

During World War II their situation worsened; they were deprived of the right to ration cards for food and other necessities and were put under stricter police surveillance.

The discrimination continued long after the war. Still, there was a program of sterilisation and among women lured into that operation were Roma women.

Schooling was not possible for Katarina as the family had to move. Indeed she learned to read and write when she was in her late twenties and had been invited to a "folkhogskola" for adults. She became a writer.

She initiated a special demonstration for Roma schooling and housing on the first of May 1966. When Roma joined the major First May demonstration in Stockholm with placards such as "We want the

right to go to school", it had a shock effect on the political establishment. From then on Katarina was a human rights campaigner.

She wrote books to explain the Roma culture and traditions. Step by step she sought to reconstruct the history of the Roma in Europe. She saw the links between the "porrajmos" during the Nazi period and the continued discrimination.

Her agenda was clear: "We Roma are also human beings. We do not want your charity, we just want the same rights as you have!"

She talked and wrote about the right of Roma - both children and adults - to get education. That they must be able to settle down and have decent housing. That the health care was a human right, also for the Roma. That the discrimination of Roma on the job market must stop.

Katarina is no longer alive. If she could see the impact of her campaigning now she would have the right to be proud. Many of her demands have been made reality. But my guess is that she would rather focus on the remaining problems and the continued discrimination against Roma in Sweden.

Indeed, her agenda is relevant even today. The rights to schooling, housing, health care and employment are still key in the efforts to stamp out discrimination against the Roma. For their protection and promotion, Roma women are important actors.

Young women in many European countries are acting in the same spirit as Katarina Taikon. That gives hope.