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“Human rights situation of Roma and Travellers in Europe”

Exchange of views with the
Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

Speech by Michael O’Flaherty
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

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Good morning everybody. Thank you for giving me the time.

I am very glad to be back with you again, something like a year and a half later. When I first met with you, I laid out four priorities, which I will not repeat again, but to which I have tried assiduously to remain committed over that period. One of those was to focus attention on standing up for the most marginalised people in our societies.

The people pushed to the edges, the people forgotten, the people “othered” to a degree that is quite remarkable. In that context, it was my choice that my first attention in terms of delivering for these people must be in standing up for the 12 million strong members of the Roma and Traveller communities.

12 million people. It is the largest ethnic minority on the continent.

As I began the work of seeing how I could better support the human rights of Roma and Travellers, I was drawn by three considerations.

The first, which I knew from my previous work over many years, was the absolutely dreadful situation that they face across the continent.

The second was the extent to which people do not pay attention. The extent to which people allow the Roma and Travellers to be hidden in plain sight in our societies. And the need to break through that, the need to find a way to get through the walls so that people would wake up in the general population and among political leaderships to see the extent to which action is needed.

And the third and the final of these sort of pre-emptory considerations of mine was once, again, drawn from years of experience, that the primary catalyst of change in the Roma and Traveller communities is women.

It is my own direct personal experience. Everywhere I have gone, I have seen the ideas, the spark for leadership, for change, to be among women.

So what do I do? Well, I travelled widely. I have done more mission travel regarding Roma and Travellers than for any other issue since I took up this position. I have looked intensively at the situation in five Council of Europe member states, chosen very deliberately to capture the different realities in different parts of the continent and making sure to include not only Roma, but also Travellers.

In travelling, my primary role was to visit, sit down, meet with, listen to members of these communities. I spent the bulk of the time in settlements, in communities, in villages, in homes, for people to tell me their stories and their sense of what was needed.

In order, to break through and get something out there that is different, not just another report, I travelled with an award-winning photojournalist as well as with a professional reporter and documentary maker.

Their task was to, in the first place, capture with images the reality, the beauty and the appallingness of the conditions, and then, with the help of the journalists, to find a way to allow the words of the people who spoke to me to be captured and transmitted to everybody else. On that basis, I have produced an output which I will launch tomorrow.

And let me say this very firmly: it is not a report.

Why? Because you could wallpaper this room with all the reports on the situation of Roma. Reports have their role, their value and significance. We need reports. But we need something more.

This is not a report. This is an anthology of stories and of voices.

It is allowing people to speak directly through the medium of what I am calling a book. It's magnificently illustrated. I did not take the pictures, so I can give credit.

The pictures throughout the book are beautiful and it is really remarkable. .

With the book, we have a travelling exhibition.

The book and the exhibition are both called *The unheard 12 million*. It is as simple as that.

The unheard 12 million. Roma and Travellers have something to say, but they're not being listened to.

The exhibition is here outside the hemicycle. It will be formally launched tomorrow. I would encourage you to please go and look at it.

Much more importantly, I would encourage you to tell us if you would like to mount it at home, in your parliament, in your capital city or somewhere else that is meaningful and significant. That is what it is for.

Coming back to the report itself, it seeks to give a voice to Roma and Travellers.

What is that voice?

In the first place, and without a doubt, the book reflects voices of resilience, of innovation, of determination, of hope. It also tells the story of an astonishing culture.

And of course, cultures in Roma society are diverse. There is no one Roma culture. There is no one Traveller culture.

The cultures are massively enriching regarding how we recognise ourselves today as Europeans in terms of the arts, music, and so many other dimensions.

And the book speaks of how women are, or can be, the drivers of transformation for their communities, as long as we give them a chance.

It is not just a 'good news' story. It is a story of the most dreadful marginalisation. I would say, without a hesitation, that one of the great scandals of our continent is the way in which we treat our Roma and Traveller members in terms of respect for their human rights.

In the book and in the exhibition, you will see and read shocking stories about housing. You will see slum conditions worse than any I have seen in the world. I worked in Sierra Leone when it was technically registered as the poorest country on earth. I spent time in the slums of Sierra Leone. I never saw anything as bad as some of the communities that I visited over the past year and a half. You will hear stories of massively discriminatory health care, particularly impacting for women seeking maternity care. Shocking stories of lack of access, of unwillingness to go to the hospital because they won't be welcomed.

You will hear stories of employment or rather unemployment. You will hear a story of the young man I met in Greece who is a fully qualified computer technician, but he cannot work – he's living with his parents in his mid-twenties. He cannot get a job because every time he applies for a job, they either look at him and make a conclusion, or they see his address, or they hear his name, the door is shut in his face. There have been some recent improvements in employment, but it is still very worrying.

Stories of education; We don't have so much formal segregation anymore, but we have a massive tolerance of de facto segregation, be it in classrooms or in schools, with all the negative consequences for everyone.

There is also the story of over-policing. There are stories of killings by police, a lack of accountability by police, and a general antigypsyism across policing in many places.

Finally, the book and the exhibition are a challenge to all of us, a challenge to each of us in our diverse roles, to play our role in working with the Roma and Travellers communities to stand up for their human rights.

In that context, I turn to this Committee and I express the deepest appreciation for the work that you are doing in this vital area.

I think the appointment of the General Rapporteur on Roma and Travellers, Mr. Stamatis, is a very important acknowledgement. Such a function does not exist in many of your national parliaments. Your taking this leadership will be noticed and can be very effective.

I would very much encourage you to continue to push hard for the largest ethnic minority in the continent to be a primary subject of attention of the Parliamentary Assembly. And please bring to your national parliaments in all of your countries the message that generating attention on this is so badly needed.

Let me close with a story, a memory.

Back at the beginning of this journey of mine last year, I was in Thessaloniki in northern Greece. I went into a community, and I met a bunch of young teenagers, 11-12-year-olds. I asked them what they wanted to be when they grow up.. One little boy said, I want to be a pilot. A girl said, I want to be a beautician. Another boy said, I want to be a mechanic. And a girl said, I want to be a lawyer.

I have no idea if those two boys and two girls will realise their dreams of becoming what they want to be. But what I do know is that if we do not work with them to stand up for their human rights, then they do not stand a chance.

Thank you for listening.