

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

Allow me to thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this 4th Forum on National Minorities.

As a preliminary remark I would like to stress that the issue of women's rights has always been on the agenda of the Council of Europe but has received increased attention in recent years with the adoption of the "Council of Europe Convention on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings" and the "Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence ". For the Council of Europe, women's rights issues are an integral part of the international protection of human rights and as such they deserve an absolute priority in the work of the Organization.

Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities with regards to the rights of women belonging to national minorities, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities is the European standard of reference. It is a legally binding multilateral instrument applicable in 39 European countries. All rights contained in the Framework Convention apply, without discrimination, to women belonging to national minorities. However, the Framework Convention requires more than just a guarantee of non-discrimination. The text calls upon the Contracting Parties to adopt specific measures to promote full and effective equality between persons belonging to a national minority and those belonging to the national majority in all spheres of economic, social, political and cultural life of the majority, while respecting the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of these persons. The aim is to ensure that persons belonging to a national minority are able to conduct their own cultural life, use their own language, open their own schools, offer their children in the language of their choice, and practice their own religion.

The Committee to Review the Implementation of the Framework Convention by States Parties is a group of 18 independent experts that regularly review the state of legislation and practice in European states and provide advice with specific recommendations to assist States in addressing identified shortcomings.

In this context, the Advisory Committee has consistently taken into account the particular situation of women belonging to national minorities. Among the wide range of national situations, which have often been very diverse, were examined. Regardless of the country concerned, its level of economic development and the extent of protection afforded to national minorities, the situation of minority women is still less satisfactory than that of men belonging to an identical national minority. The reason is well known: women face multiple discrimination, including discrimination as a woman and discrimination as an ethnic minority. Consequently, the obstacles they have to overcome in order to benefit from the most elementary rights are sometimes almost impassable. Even before being heard by administrations, employers, public authorities and the judiciary, they often have to struggle in their own communities and their families. These difficulties are particularly exacerbated for women belonging to the Roma minority.

In all the countries under review, the Advisory Committee found that access to the labor market, housing and healthcare is even more difficult for Roma women than for the male population of this community. Yet the Advisory Committee has noted in some countries interesting initiatives involving Roma women, particularly in the field of education. Closely involved as "mediators" in finding solutions to reduce school absenteeism of Roma children, especially girls, they have succeeded in convincing their community of the importance of education and of leaving girls and boys pursue higher education. The participation of women in the decision-making process concerning them is certainly an essential element of success. Unfortunately, this type of initiative does not necessarily lead to sustainable employment.

One of the problems encountered by the Advisory Committee in assessing the situation of minority women accurately is the lack of statistical data disaggregated by gender and ethnic origin. The complex issue of ethnic minorities makes it difficult to collect data on the socio-economic status of these women. These data are important in understanding the magnitude of the problem and addressing it with appropriate policies. Nevertheless, for historical reasons, obvious and understandable, most countries refuse to establish such collections and instead resort to studies or surveys less precise.

The Advisory Committee also noted that the global economic crisis had a negative impact on the situation of persons belonging to national minorities, especially women. These people are the most affected by unemployment, and are also stigmatized and confronted with a rise in intolerance and racism. In this context, in its most recent opinions, the Advisory Committee has noted that budgetary restrictions disproportionately concern programs specifically targeted at minorities, such as subsidies for cultural activities or minority-language media, which are not considered priority. To the extent that access to health care is also increasingly expensive, the most vulnerable groups, particularly minority women, are excluded.

Similar findings have been made by ECRI, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (see the detailed contribution that is available to you from the reference documents). In this area, ECRI's General Policy Recommendations are guidelines for member states. It should be noted that the ECRI also examined the situation of migrant women in irregular situations, a particularly vulnerable group. Other Council of Europe work also deals with the situation of women belonging to national minorities. Without wishing to be exhaustive, I would like to point out that several judgments of the ECHR are of crucial importance to women, such as the judgment of 9 June 2009 on domestic violence. An important judgment regarding the forced sterilization of a Roma woman is also expected by the end of the year. Thank you for your attention.