

Fourth Session of the Forum on Minority Issues
„Guaranteeing the rights of minority women"

- Effective participation in economic, social and cultural life -

At the outset I would like to express my satisfaction for being able to address this annual session where we will have an opportunity, to benefit from experiences of various countries in improving the effective participation of women in economic, social and cultural life. Allow me to present you some Croatian experience in this area.

In relevant Croatian strategic documents both, participation of minorities in the labour market and its gender aspect have received special attention from the beginning. The Constitutional Act on Rights of National Minorities, and the corresponding action plan for its implementation, contains clear measures for improving the participation of women. Thus, for example, the Constitutional Act ensures the participation of national minorities in the public life and decision-making at the local level through elected councils and representatives of national minorities. At the election for councils and representatives of national minorities held in July 2011, out of a total of 3.189 elected council members and representatives of national minorities, around 113 of them were women.

Allow me to begin by focusing specifically on the issues related to the participation of Roma women. The Office for National Minorities co-funded a research project conducted by the Roma women Association "Better future" in cooperation with the leading Croatian institute for social research. The results of the research have shown that some key challenges still remain in this area. Roma women who live in mostly traditional communities under difficult living conditions constitute the most vulnerable part of the Roma population. Even though huge advances were made in the area of education, the research shows that Roma girls still leave school earlier than Roma boys. It is particularly important to note the conclusion that lower educational achievements are not related to the discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, but to discrimination based on gender. That can be partly attributed to traditional understanding of gender roles within Roma communities, which include early marriage and childbirth. Roma girls lack the support of their communities in continuing education, for their role is understood as mainly family oriented. Obviously, a more proactive approach is needed to remedy this. It is regrettable that civil society in Roma communities is still relatively weak. We are trying to address this problem through additional efforts in capacity building. In some cases more coordination and engagement with local authorities has helped in implementing measures intended to benefit minorities, but further efforts are still needed.

The research also highlighted the importance of education in relation to employment opportunities, as Roma women with a high school degree find appropriate full time jobs easier than those with only primary level education or those with no education at all. Even though a certain trend of empowerment of Roma women can be detected, their employment is still low when compared to Roma men, and especially in comparison with the employment rate of the general population.

In the new National Roma Program, a number of new measures are being proposed, some of which specifically aim at improving the access of Roma women to education and employment, with others intended to contribute in improving their position in general.

Special attention to minority women has been given in the National Strategy for Gender Equality for the period 2011-2015 as well. One of the goals of the Strategy is to eliminate the discrimination faced by Roma women in the areas of employment, education, participation in public life and decision making, health care and obtaining the right to citizenship.

The Croatian Employment Service is responsible for carrying out policies aimed at improving opportunities in the labour market for vulnerable groups. Among current activities, the Employment Service is implementing the project called *"Women in the labour market"* in cooperation with other partners. The project, which is financed under the IPA programme, focuses on increasing the employability of disadvantaged groups of women and assisting their access to the labour market. It is aimed at unemployed women over 40, long-term unemployed women, inactive women, unemployed women from counties with the highest unemployment rates, and **unemployed women belonging to national minorities, and Roma minority in particular.**

Another project, called "Supporting equality in Croatian labour market" and financed under the PROGRESS programme has been implemented by the Croatian Employment Service, the Government Office for Human Rights and other partners in 2009 and 2010. This Project specifically addresses race and ethnicity, disability, age, religion and sexual orientation. The main project objective is to ensure better implementation of the national and EU legislation aimed at combating discrimination.

Moreover, the Government Office for Gender Equality has established in 2009 a Working Group for enhancing the collection of statistical data on the position of Roma women in local community, particularly with regards to their education, employment, health care and participation in public and political life. The members of the Working Group are government officials from relevant institutions, among others a representative of the Government Office for National Minorities, Roma women representatives and independent experts. The working group aims at eliminating discrimination of Roma women and has drafted guidelines for enhancing the collection of statistical data on the position of Roma women.

To conclude, the Croatian Government will continue to invest great efforts in improving the position of women belonging to national minorities, particularly in areas that need special attention such as access to education and employment and will continue to support projects and initiatives that are

Thank you.

aimed toward enabling national minorities, and especially minority women, to fully participate in economic, social and cultural life in Croatia.