



THE HOLY SEE
2012 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Working Session 6: Specifically selected topic: Roma/Sinti
and, in particular, empowerment of Roma women.
Thursday, September 27, 2012

Mister Chairperson,

1. For the Holy See, education is a fundamental and indispensable condition for development and empowerment. While in the past the predominately wandering life of Roma and Sinti made systematic schooling of youngsters difficult, today the obstacles to be overcome are more related to the type of education given. Their integration – where possible – within the normal educational process would help to overcome any shortcomings. When semi-sedentarization or nomadism makes systematic and normal education impossible, joint initiatives by governments, Roma and Sinti associations, and also the Church, are needed to provide instruction to Roma and Sinti women in some other way.

2. Likewise, it is necessary to consider all the aspects of development that Roma women should benefit from, such as professional training for young Roma women, access to healthcare, decent housing conditions and social security. However, if Roma and Sinti history is not taken into account, social action will tend to take the stance that it is a question of dealing with social deviation. After all, Roma and Sinti may easily be considered as anti-social elements to be brought back as soon as possible within the fold of majority society. This would deny the discrimination that Roma and Sinti have been subjected to for centuries and the recognition of the specific nature of their culture would not be achieved.

What is needed, instead, is to give central importance to respect for every human being, especially if conditions of life have made him or her fragile. This gives rise to some criteria that should be taken into account when dealing with development projects for Roma women. If such projects systematically relegate Roma women to the status of welfare beneficiaries, they risk missing their objective from the outset. Undoubtedly, circumstances may call for adequate welfare assistance, but genuine promotion should go well beyond that until all Roma and Sinti become truly responsible for the resources needed for their own development.

3. The Catholic Church is concerned that many Roma women, especially as a result of social and cultural conditioning, do not become fully aware of their dignity. Others are victims of a materialistic and hedonistic outlook which views them as mere objects of pleasure, and does not hesitate to organize their exploitation into a

despicable trade. Special concern needs to be shown for these women, particularly by other women who, thanks to their own upbringing and sensitivity, are able to help them discover their own inner worth and resources.

4. Faced with the challenge of education, Roma women are often left alone. It is then, however, that they most need to be assisted, not only by the practical solidarity of other families, of communities of a religious nature and of volunteer groups, but also by the State and by International Organizations through appropriate structures of human, social and economic support which will enable them to meet the needs of their children without being forced to deprive them unduly of their own indispensable presence.

5. The Catholic Church explicitly recognizes the dignity and affirms the fundamental human rights of Roma and Sinti people, including Roma women. Thereby, she has contributed to a wider-ranging discovery of the problem and hence of the approach to it. We must not undervalue the important work of evangelization and catechesis that many people dedicated to the pastoral care of Roma and Sinti carry out every day. Not everyone may know that today there are about 100 priests, deacons, religious and sisters of Roma and Sinti origin, as well as a Section dedicated to Roma and Sinti people in the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples.

6. In conclusion, Mister Chairperson, if we are to speak of authentic acceptance — also in terms of integration and cultural encounter at the national and international levels — a great shift in mentalities is called for, also in the civil sector. Acceptance actually requires consideration of the identity and dignity of Roma and Sinti women and the consequent commitment to guaranteeing them a dignified life and respect for their basic rights. The international community has made considerable progress, thanks also to the contribution of the OSCE. Nevertheless, strategic cooperation is as yet insufficient and a better use of the instruments available to the international community is certainly necessary.

Thank you, Mister Chairperson.