

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ROMA
"HOW EUROPE TREATS ITS BIGGEST MINORITY – THE FUNDAMENTAL
RIGHTS SITUATION OF SINTI AND ROMA IN EUROPE"

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Speech by Morten Kjærum
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Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Frau Muller,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

A Roma man who had moved from one European country to another told the EU Fundamental Rights Agency: ‘The amount of racism and discrimination our family was facing was unbearable. The real reason why we left was our two sons, who were laughed at, because of having a ‘Gypsy’ mother. It’s good that we were able to exercise our rights because we are EU citizens and we can move freely in the EU.....’

This is Europe 2011.

The surveys conducted by the agency show us that of the Roma respondents:

- 60% experience discrimination when looking for work;
- 25% experience discrimination from health care personnel; and,
- 18% are victims of racially motivated assaults or threats.

In some EU Member States, only 2 - 5% of Roma children get education beyond 5th grade, compared to more than 90% of majority children. These

figures are dramatic not only for the 10-12 million Roma living in Europe – but for all Europeans.

The research of the last 10 years suggests three key conclusions. First, that discrimination perpetuates the vicious circle of poverty and social exclusion: discrimination results in exclusion from education, which leads to exclusion from employment, which leads to increased poverty, which forces people to live in bad housing conditions, which, in turn, affects their educational and employment opportunities, as well as their health... And the circle starts again...

Second, we know that discrimination itself is closely related to the broader context of poverty and social exclusion. To break the cycle of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, we need an integrated approach that tackles all these issues. Housing, employment, education and health care must all be tackled, and simultaneously.

Third, the research shows that many Roma communities and families live segregated lives from the majority. This impacts on their relations with their non-Roma neighbours and local authorities, and decisively affects their poor social and economic situation.

In line with EU's Europe 2020 strategy community cohesion must therefore be at the heart of any strategy to tackle the poverty and social exclusion of Roma. In order to achieve this, Roma must be invited to participate themselves, as active citizens, in the design and implementation of policies that affect them. But, equally important, their non-Roma neighbours must also be involved. This is the only way to fight prejudice and build community cohesion where it counts: locally.

As the Council of the EU has stressed: “**Integration efforts must target Roma explicitly, but not exclusively**”. So, the important role of local authorities should not be neglected.

In a period of economic crisis it is easy to put Roma integration aside and let it wait for “better times”. But here I want to recall that this is not only about human rights protection but also about the future economy in several EU Member States. In a few years from now 10, 15, up to 25% of the young people entering the work force in several EU Member States will be Roma. Society needs them and they need society – majority and Roma populations are intimately interconnected and interrelated.

For this relationship to develop for the benefit of all we need to increase our capacity to address the fears against the other on both sides. We cannot continue to ignore the violence against Roma, just as we cannot ignore the theft, begging and trafficking committed by some Roma. Only an open and informed discourse facing the real anxieties and fears from all quarters can bring us forward and break down hostile attitudes. This is not a Roma problem, it is a European problem.

It is promising that the European Commission in April this year established an EU framework for national Roma integration strategies. This marks in many ways a new beginning of much more targeted approaches. It outlines 3 stages: Creating a sustainable national strategy, ensuring better use of EU funds and finally **measuring progress on the ground** through systematic surveys in order to adapt policies and legislation where necessary.

The Fundamental Rights Agency will support the efforts of the European Commission and will work together with **Member States** in developing effective monitoring tools to assess the impact of the policies on Roma integration.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the challenge is great and it is complex, but we cannot walk away from it. The ultimate aim is that the two sons of the man that I mentioned in my opening remarks can live in a society free of discrimination and in a society where Roma enjoy equal opportunities with everyone else.

Thank you for your attention.