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PANEL I

**Key policy initiatives to eliminate all forms of discrimination and
violence against the girl child**

Written statement*
submitted by

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

“BREAKING THE SILENCE” –ROMANI GIRL CHILD ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION

1. First and foremost, I greatly appreciate the interest of the Commission on the Status of Women in the situation of Romani girls in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). I am very happy to be here and to share some of my thoughts and experiences with you.

Unfortunately, however, I cannot talk much about governmental policy initiatives since there is not much in the region which would address specifically those issues that Romani girls face today.

2. Before I discuss the situation of Romani girls, I would like to make a note on the Roma population, which is the largest ethnic minority in Europe, between 7 and 9 million. Roma is the common name of a variety of sub-ethnic groups located all over in Europe who identify themselves as Romani. They are located mainly in Central and Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, but there are smaller numbers of Roma across Western Europe as well. All sub-ethnic groups have a distinct culture. However, all of them share similar experiences of systematic discrimination, institutional racism, economic hardship and social exclusion. According to the World Bank in Central and Southeastern Europe, Roma have emerged as the most prominent poverty risk group in many of the countries. Recent World Bank country studies on poverty for Central and Eastern Europe have shown that Roma are both poorer than other population groups and more likely to fall into poverty and remain poor. According to various research studies, there is a close link between education and the risk of poverty. Studies show that poverty affects both children's prospects of attending schools and their performance. Children from poor families are more likely not to attend or to drop out of school than other children for a range of reasons, including: financial and opportunity costs, imperfect information about the benefits of education, limited choice and poor quality of educational services, substandard housing conditions at home that impede learning and studying, poor health status, or early marriage and child birth.

3. Allow me to start with a story about my classmates from the elementary school. Viola was my classmate in elementary school until seventh grade (age 12-13), when she gave birth to a child out of wedlock. According to her, the baby was born out of love with a non-Roma man who refused to take responsibility for her and the baby. His family would have immediately chased him away if he had shown any interest to live with her. The adoption seemed like the only option to offer a better life for her child. She was persuaded by her parents, who had a lot of health problems and suffered from unemployment, to keep the child. Viola was terrified to go home with a fatherless baby in their community. Moreover, she went through a severe depression without professional help. The teenage mother and her baby lived in the most disadvantaged area in the village in Eastern Hungary, without any opportunity to continue her education and without any prospects to find a job.

4. You may wonder why I presented this story. Is it very characteristic of Romani girls? My answer would be that this is an illustration of the kind of scenarios that could happen in the life of Romani girls under the age of 14. Research shows that in very poor, residentially segregated Roma communities, many girls drop out of school for various reasons. The reasons may be to provide help in the household or they might marry and have children at a very young age. However, data shows that today, a smaller number of Romani women marry before the age of 18 than a generation ago, and the trend is that the

number of early age marriages has decreased even more. In a research sample used by the Open Society Institute¹, it is shown that in Romania, 53 percent of Romani women are married before the age of 18, while 70 percent of their mothers got married before they were 18. Concerning early marriage, a World Bank study conducted in participation with the Center for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) has found a correlation between trafficking for prostitution and early marriage². According to this study, in Albania “it is not unusual for a girl to have two babies around the age of 15.” The early marriages are not registered as they are illegal and the children of these young couples are very seldom registered, which makes them vulnerable to trafficking and illegal adoption”. These arguments supported by the research show that 5 percent of the 660 families interviewed for the study had a case in their immediate or extended family of a young divorced Roma mother trafficked for prostitution. Early marriage and the involvement in trafficking and prostitution impede their ability to complete their education, gain employment and be in control of their lives.

5. In recent times, when Romani women or girl issues gained visibility in international media, it was always connected to what is viewed as the “exotic” traditional oppression such as early marriages, which were presented as the sole factor affecting the experience of young Romani girls. I do not want to deny that in some of the communities, Romani girls are still oppressed but I do want to dispute the monofocal conceptualization of “Roma culture” as being the sole cause of the experiences of Romani women³. I believe that there is not much contextualization and social analysis behind this kind of ‘exoticization’ and therefore, there is a lack of challenge and exploration of the root causes and the systemic institutional discrimination against Romani girls. I would encourage you to address the systemic gendered discrimination against Romani girls and to introduce legal and policy measures to prevent early marriage and its consequences.

6. Nevertheless, I would like to go back to the Viola story, which represents the manifestation of intersectional and multiple inequalities. Viola, being a Romani girl living in a very poor segregated area, a teenage mother, dropped out of school, facing discrimination by her community for being a single mother and condescended by her lover and his family for being Romani - she remained completely invisible for public policy.

7. Although the concept of intersectionality is increasingly used in gender studies, sociology, and economy, in public policy there has been no recognition and reference to it when multiple inequalities are being addressed. Romani girls face intersectional discrimination based on their race/ethnicity, gender and class. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive, and may reinforce one another.

8. First of all, if we were to assume that Romani girls face systemic inequalities, then we would need reliable data to vindicate it. To design social policies or any affirmative action without quantitative calculation would be risky for the responsible institutions. There are a

¹ Read more about it in the Research Report Prepared for the Roma Participation Program, Open Society Institute *Broadening the Agenda: The Status of Romani Women in Romania*, 2006, OSI, New York

² For more information in the OSCE-ODIHR CPRSI: *Assessment Trip to Albania on Trafficking in Children from Roma and Egyptian Communities*. Report, 6-21 June, 2003, can be accessed at <http://194.8.63.155/odhr/documents.html?lsi=true&grp=241&limit=10&pos=10>

³ For more on the conceptualization of early marriages by Alexandra Oprea „The Arranged Marriage of Ana Maria Cioaba, Intra-Community Oppression and Romani Feminist Ideals.” *European Journal of Women's Studies* 2005 12: 133-148

number of documents that point out the importance of data on Roma and it is very unfortunate that relatively few people speak about the necessity to have data disaggregated by sex and ethnicity. As it is suggested by Alexandra Oprea, a “multidimensional statistics would be one important aspect of remedying structural discrimination against Romani women.”⁴

9. According to human rights activists and legal scholars, one of the greatest misconceptions among key players (researchers, as well as policy makers, government officers and Roma politicians) is that they do not make a methodological distinction between personal and statistical data. They believe that collecting data disaggregated by ethnicity violates data protection law. Therefore, it would be illegal to use it for any purpose. As one Hungarian scholar, Andrea Krizsan, stated, data protection legislation shall be understood properly; gathering anonymous ethnic statistics is possible and acceptable, as these types of statistics do not establish a relationship between data and specific persons.

10. Also there is a concern, expressed by the Roma community, that any statistics on Roma could be abused to reinforce racial stereotypes about some Roma groups being pathologically violent or criminals. I believe that these fears based on historical experiences are well-founded. But they are also potentially against the interest of Romani women and girls, as they do not help ‘break the silence and invisibility’ within the respective communities, thus hindering policy initiatives to eliminate intersectional discrimination and violence against Romani girls. The lack of data disaggregated by ethnicity and gender should not be seen by governments and the UN system as an excuse for inaction. In the meantime, until the governments improve the desegregated data collection and monitoring, there are various sociological surveys and ethnographic field notes that could be used to improve the situation of Romani girls.

11. Despite the fact that we do not have official desegregated data in the CEE and SEE countries, there are some quantifiable inequalities in the school system across the European countries.

12. The situation of Romani girls and boys in the educational system all over in Europe is very troubling. I would like to highlight some of the extreme levels of racial segregation. For example, there was a research conducted by the European Roma Rights Center in the 1998-1999 school year in the city of Ostrava, in the Czech Republic. The data showed that in the eight special education schools in the city of Ostrava, Roma students constituted 56% of all students during the 1998-99 school year. At the time, Roma represented less than five percent of all primary school-age students in Ostrava. By contrast, in the 70 ordinary primary schools in Ostrava, just over two percent of the students were Roma. Overall, Romani children in Ostrava were more than 27 times as likely to end up in special education schools as non-Romani children. Nationwide, as the Czech government itself conceded, approximately 75% of Romani children attended special education schools and substantially more than half of all special education school students were

⁴ Alexandra Oprea “ The Erasure of Romani Women in Statistical Data: Limits of the Race-versus-Gender Approach”, it is published on the EUMAP website, accessed on February 5, 2007
<http://www.eumap.org/journal/features/2003/april/romastats>

Roma. According to the follow up research in 2003, these trends have not changed⁵. The Czech Republic is not the only place where Romani children are disproportionately overrepresented in schools or classes for the mentally handicapped. The same trend can be observed in Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria but even in Western countries as well. Also, observable in these countries is the increasing territorial segregation of the Roma, which leads to the “ghettoized” schools, where there are more than 80 percent of Roma students. Romani children in these “segregated” schools but also in the schools for mentally handicapped are provided substandard education. All this causes a serious disadvantage for them and disqualifies Romani children from admission to certain secondary and tertiary educational institutions.

13. In addition, according to NGO reports, there are many Romani children who never have any opportunity to attend school at all. In some places such as Romania and the South Eastern European countries, they have been blocked from enrolling in schools by officials since these Romani children lack residence permits as well as birth certificates. Similar administrative obstacles for the enrollment of Romani children in schools have been documented in France. The non-governmental organization Socio-Educative Tzigane d’Aquitaine (USETA) reported that during the 1999-2000 academic school-year, Romani children were refused either in pre-school, elementary or secondary schools for various apparently pre-textual reasons: lack of places, lack of teaching materials, and no certificate of schooling to evaluate the academic level of the children. Also, we know from various NGO reports and field notes that many Romani children in Italy live in segregated “camps for nomads” and effectively have no access to the Italian school system. I could continue with the list of countries where Roma children face similar exclusion from the educational system. Thousands of Romani children live in total deprivation without prospects and chances to break the vicious circle inherited through generations.

14. It is very unfortunate that we do not have information from all the school research and field notes that illustrate how school discrimination and racial segregation affect Romani girls. The information on educational attainment by gender is scarce. For example, one of the qualitative studies conducted in Bulgaria in 8 settlements illustrated that women were much less likely to have gone to school-29 percent had never gone to school or had dropped out before finishing grade 4, in comparison with 11 percent of men-and were also less likely to have continued on to upper secondary school⁶. These evidences suggest that girls drop out of school earlier than boys because of early marriage and child birth.

15. Presumably, there is a similar pattern in Central and Southeastern Europe as well. I assume that there is a significant difference between the experience of Romani and non-Romani girls as well as that of Romani girls and boys.

16. The challenge for all of us is how much we can operationalize the intersectional discriminations and inequalities Romani girls face in these days. How long do we want to

⁵ For a detailed account of the segregation of Romani children in „ special schools” for the mentally handicapped in the Czech Republic, see the European Roma Rights Center Country Report, *A Special Remedy Roma and Schools for the Mentally Handicapped in the Czech Republic*, Country Reports Series No. 8, June 1999

⁶ Reference on the research was made by Dena Ringold, “ Education of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe: Trends and Challenges”, *The Roma Education Resource Book*, 2001, edited by Christina McDonald, Judit Kovacs and Csaba Fenyes, pp. 26

ignore the structural gendered discrimination against Romani girls? How long do we want to reproduce the subaltern position of Romani women and girls by our institutions? How long do we want to wait to work with Romani women? How long do we want to keep the “third world” conditions of Romani girls in the heart of Europe? Who cares about Romani girls? Do we? Do you? I do!

17. I hope that this occasion will be a starting point of our work to recognize and address the issues of Romani girls. If you feel that the situation I have just described gives you a feeling of discomfort, then it is a solid signal to break the silence and start working to change the situation of Romani girls and their access to quality education.

Policy Recommendations:

- Governments should establish a data collection method in line with international standards on data protection to document the situation and needs of Roma with particular attention to the women and girls. Such data should be disaggregated on the basis of ethnicity and gender. The data and information which are gathered should enable governments and intergovernmental to draw meaningful comparisons between states and assists states and bodies working on the issues to develop policies and courses of action to address the specific needs of Romani girls, including access to quality education.
- Intergovernmental organizations and governments should develop ways of promoting understanding and concern among policy makers and educators regarding the specific needs and interests of Romani girl children. Moreover, they should endorse policy makers and educators to use data disaggregated by ethnicity and gender and apply them in their work.
- Governments should initiate research on the girls’ school attendance patterns and identifies appropriate means of intervention to reduce girls’ dropout at the elementary and secondary school level. They should pay specific attention on Romani girls.
- Governments should increase the role of local government and parent associations in mobilizing and supporting parents to keep girls in school through the lower secondary level. Increase public awareness of the benefits of girls’ education with a specific attention to the Romani girls.
- Governments should revise school textbooks and curriculum to reflect positively on the gender equality and include specifically Romani women and girls issues as well.
- The governments should raise gender awareness among policy makers in the educational system with a specific attention to Romani women and girls issues. Integrate gender analysis in the setting of targets for enrolment levels in vocational and higher education.
- The governments should increase Romani women's and girls’ participation in the educational system and provide scholarships for them to obtain in higher education.