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Living together in 21st-century Europe: follow-up to the report of the Group of Eminent Persons of the Council of Europe

Committee Opinion¹

Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men

Rapporteur: Ms Elvira KOVÁCS, Serbia, Group of the European People's Party

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men welcomes the report by the Group of Eminent Persons of the Council of Europe on “Living together – Combining diversity and freedom in 21st-century Europe” and supports the views expressed in the report of the Political Affairs Committee.
2. It is a fact that, despite a rise in nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric in politics, European citizens are going to become more and more “hyphenated”. Increased mobility and migration multiply identities and intensify Europe’s ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. Diversity not only is here to stay but is bound to grow.
3. The report of the Group of Eminent Persons should be considered a blueprint for the Council of Europe’s work in the coming years. In implementing its recommendations, the Committee of Ministers should carefully take into account the different situation of women and men within “minority groups”, fully incorporating the dimension of gender mainstreaming.
4. Equality between women and men is a human right that cannot be achieved through gender-blind policies. The Council of Europe should devise specific measures to promote the participation, empowerment and equality of women from the groups mentioned in the living together report, in order to build genuinely inclusive European societies, based on a common understanding and acceptance of human rights and the rights of women.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Kovács, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. I have a personal and direct connection to the Group of Eminent Persons’ report on living together. I am a hyphenated European, as a Serbian citizen and an ethnic Hungarian, with a strong belief in a common European identity. And I am proud of being hyphenated.
2. I support the report by the Group of Eminent Persons and commend the work done by the Political Affairs Committee and its rapporteur, Mr Latchezar Toshev.

1. Reference to committee: Reference 3752 of 11 March 2011. Reporting committee: Political Affairs Committee. See [Doc. 12631](#). Opinion approved by the committee on 8 June 2011.



3. In my opinion, the living together report has important merits: it reflects and reiterates a number of considerations that the Assembly had already made in previous resolutions and recommendations. Therefore it goes exactly in the direction in which the Assembly wants to go. It is a forward-looking report that puts great emphasis on proposals for action and recommendations. Now, it remains for us to suggest measures for its implementation and to put our political weight behind its effective implementation.

4. As rapporteur for opinion of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, I shall refrain from making further general comments on the living together report and focus on aspects relating to gender equality and the rights of women.

2. The marginalisation of women from minority groups

5. Women from the groups addressed in the Eminent Persons' report represent "a minority within a minority". They are affected by marginalisation and exclusion for the following reasons:

- because they belong to a group that is perceived as "different";
- because they are women, and therefore disadvantaged by the lack of *de facto* gender equality in society;
- because of the widespread patriarchal mentality in the minority groups to which they belong, which confines them to a stereotyped and subordinate role in relation to men.

6. This multiple marginalisation is not simply theoretical; it is tangible, and, if statistics were regularly collected, it would be measurable. Compared to other women, and to men from the same background, women from minority groups:

- have a lower employment rate;
- have lower salaries and/or worse working conditions;
- have a lower level of education;
- have a lower level of participation in public and political life;
- encounter greater barriers to benefiting from social rights;
- have greater difficulties in gaining access to justice;
- are at greater risk of being victims of violence or trafficking, especially for the purposes of sexual exploitation.

7. I welcome the fact that the Group of Eminent Persons recognise immigrant women as a specific group, saying that "immigrant women live as a minority." It is a sad fact that migrant women are especially vulnerable to abuse by crime syndicates engaged in smuggling, human trafficking and modern forms of slavery. They face additional threats of marginalisation, job losses and deprivation of economic and social rights. There are also many cases of violence against undocumented women, and they are the primary victims of the odious crime of human trafficking.

8. The situation of women from a particular group mentioned in the Eminent Persons' report will help me highlight the magnitude of the challenge faced by women from minorities.

3. The example of Roma women

9. Last year, as rapporteur for opinion on the situation of the Roma in Europe and relevant activities of the Council of Europe,² I had the occasion to look into the situation experienced by Roma women.

10. The living together report rightly highlights education as one of the main tools to promote inclusiveness and social cohesion. Unfortunately, Roma women are virtually excluded from educational opportunity. They have higher illiteracy rates than Roma men and significantly higher than non-Roma men and women: not even half of all Roma girls in Europe have gone beyond the level of primary education.

2. See [Doc. 12236](#).

11. This is partly because of Roma families' lower expectations for girls to complete their education and partly because Roma girls, from a very early age, are burdened with family obligations, such as household tasks or looking after younger siblings. Arranged marriages and teen pregnancies, frequent among Roma girls, further reduce their chances for normal schooling and their potential for full inclusion in society.

12. Roma women are particularly marginalised when it comes to health. As a result of fewer opportunities in the labour market and lower educational levels, Roma women are more likely to be excluded from health insurance. This discourages Roma women from seeking medical advice, which has serious negative consequences for their health, especially in the areas of reproductive and maternal health, as well as emergency care.

13. Violence against women, in particular domestic violence, occurs within Roma communities on a daily basis. And yet, because of a culture of silence that prevails in those communities, as well as to the insufficient knowledge of their rights and limited access to justice, Roma women seldom denounce these offences to the relevant authorities.

14. Owing to their limited education, as well as for cultural reasons, women find it difficult to express their political views and participate actively in the Roma political movement.

15. The example of Roma women shows how the Council of Europe's work with respect to inclusion is bound to fail unless it incorporates the dimension of gender mainstreaming. The Council should ensure that its activities aimed at promoting access to education, health, justice and political participation for the Roma will benefit both boys and girls, men and women, because the challenges they face are different – and are greater for girls and women.

4. No to human rights relativism

16. Human rights are universal. They are not bound to a region, a nationality or a community. Council of Europe member states have a responsibility to prevent the resurgence on their territories of pockets where human rights are not considered the rule, in the name of religious, cultural or traditional customs or norms.

17. The guiding principles set out in the Eminent Persons' report state:

*"The equal rights of men and women, proclaimed in the preamble to the United Nations Charter, cannot and must not be denied or ignored, least of all in a democratic society. Under no circumstances can respect for group identity or religious belief be invoked to justify the exclusion of girls from any form of education which is available to boys, or the seclusion of adult women from normal interaction with society outside their home."*³

18. I agree with this statement, but I believe that the question should be approached from a much wider angle. The right to education is, of course, fundamental because it is the key to economic empowerment, political participation and, ultimately, full inclusion in society. Preventing the seclusion of adult women is also important. Without normal interaction outside their home, women belonging to minorities have no chance of feeling part of broader society.

19. However, it ought to be clearly stated that women, like men, should be able to enjoy the whole spectrum of acknowledged human rights.

20. In addition, I consider it dangerous to distinguish between what happens at home and what happens outside.

21. There should be a continuum between the enjoyment of human rights in the home, in the community and in society at large. Women should be free from being beaten up, from being raped (including by their husbands) and from being subjected to child marriages. They should be free to marry the person they choose, to work outside the home, to wear what they like and to reject the cultural traditions and the way of life characteristic of their communities.

22. These are all human rights, and there is nothing private about them. The fact that women from some minority groups are deprived of the enjoyment of these rights in the name of tradition is a public concern and requires adequate preventive measures and response from the authorities.

3. Principle 6.

5. Women from minorities as a bridge between their communities and society

23. I was very interested to see that the Eminent Persons' report mentions the case of Famile Arsan, a Muslim Dutch lawyer of Turkish origin, as a role model.

24. There is, indeed, a need to explore further the potential for women from minority groups to act as a bridge between their communities and the larger society. Given their role in the education and upbringing of children, women can make a difference in the way in which new generations manage to negotiate their multiple identities.

25. Council of Europe policies should, therefore, put more emphasis on the potential of women from minorities, in the context of the implementation of policies to strengthen the cohesion of societies.

26. To enable women from minority communities to perform this bridging task, however, it is not sufficient to ensure that "they are not excluded" from education and that "they are not secluded" from society, to use the words of the extract from the living together report. It is also necessary to apply positive measures specifically targeting women, which will make it possible for them to overcome the many cultural, religious and traditional barriers that prevent them from achieving a status equal to men in their communities and in society at large.

27. I also welcome the recognition of the importance of competent authorities at all levels, which should identify groups suffering from particular socio-economic disadvantages and make special efforts, with allocation of appropriate resources, to enable members of such groups to overcome these disadvantages and enjoy genuine equality of opportunities with the rest of the population. I agree that these groups should primarily include children and the young, but I would also like to add women.

28. Finally, the choice of Famile Arsan as a role model by the Eminent Persons reminded me that, all too often, when casting a light on the situation of women, in particular women from minorities, we focus on them as victims. While we should continue to raise our concerns, we should also publicise success stories: women from minorities also fight for their rights, their equality and their empowerment. And sometimes they succeed, without having to relinquish their multiple identities.

6. Rapporteur's conclusions

29. Today, in Europe, women from minority groups face multiple discrimination, which not only represents a human rights violation but also prevents their full inclusion in society. In addition, their subordinate status within their communities and limited access to education prevent them from playing a bridging role and helping new generations to reconcile their multiple national, ethnic, religious and cultural identities.

30. I believe that the Parliamentary Assembly should support the report by the Group of Eminent Persons, while making specific suggestions for its implementation.