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Experts of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Commend Slovakia on the Adoption of Temporary Special Measures for Roma Women, Ask about Services Provided to Female Ukrainian Refugees and Healthcare for Roma Women

17 May 2023

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The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women today concluded its consideration of the seventh periodic report of Slovakia, with Committee Experts congratulating Slovakia on its temporary special measures for Roma women, and asking questions about services provided to Ukrainian female refugees, and healthcare for Roma women.

A Committee Expert congratulated Slovakia for the progress it had made, including the implementation of national projects on the promotion of pre-primary education of children from marginalised Roma communities and one entitled “you have a chance too!”. These were good examples of using temporary special measures to accelerate Roma women’s substantive equality.

Another Expert commended the State on acts adopted to aid those fleeing Ukraine. How effectively had these laws been implemented, particularly for women, who made up 80 per cent of Ukrainian refugees? How would Ukrainian women who had been raped have access to services, such as abortion?

A Committee Expert said 45 per cent of Roma women had their first child before the age of 18. There were no campaigns on sexual health for teenagers. What was being done to ensure the entire population had access to healthcare? How would it be ensured that all the women in Slovakia, in any region or socio-economic group, had access to abortion?

Regarding Ukrainian refugees, the delegation said there had been activities to integrate children into schools, and provide psychological support to those who needed it. A telephone helpline service had been

provided for Ukrainian speakers, rerouting them to assistance in their own language. Ukrainian women had access to abortion under certain conditions. If the pregnancy was the result of a crime being committed against the woman, the abortion was considered urgent medical care and was covered by the State.

The delegation said the healthy regions organization had 246 assistants who worked in hospitals to help Roma women with translations, and helped them understand their rights. The organization had certain assistants who focused specifically on educating Roma women on topics, including sexual and reproductive rights, infectious diseases, and family planning. These assistants were able to liaise with doctors to bridge the language and social barriers. The optimisation of the hospital network would centralise medical services and allow for unimpeded access to abortion across the country.

Dušan Matulay, Permanent Representative of the Slovak Republic to the United Nations Office at Geneva and head of the delegation, introducing the report, said Slovakia's most important strategic document in the area of equal treatment was the Anti-Discrimination Act, which regulated the principle of equal treatment and determined remedies for legal protection. Another important document was the national action plan for the prevention and elimination of violence against women 2022–2027, which defined public policies to achieve a visible change in the prevention and elimination of violence against women. Mr. Matulay said Slovakia took its obligations under the Convention very seriously, and highly valued the work of the Committee.

In concluding remarks, Mr. Matulay thanked the Committee Experts for their valuable expertise and comments, as well as civil society members who had provided the Government with key information.

Ana Peláez Narváez, Committee Chairperson, thanked the delegation for the constructive dialogue, which allowed the Committee to better understand the situation of women in Slovakia.

The delegation of Slovakia was comprised of representatives from the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family; the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Justice; the Ministry of Science, Education, Research and Sport; the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs; the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities; and the Permanent Representative of Slovakia to the United Nations at Geneva.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's eighty-fifth session is being held from 8 to 26 May. All documents relating to the Committee's work, including reports submitted by States parties, can be found on the session's [webpage](#). Meeting summary releases can be found [here](#). The webcast of the Committee's public meetings can be accessed via the [UN Web TV webpage](#).

The Committee will next meet at 10 a.m. on Thursday, 18 May to consider the ninth periodic report of Venezuela ([CEDAW/C/VEN/9](#)).

Report

The Committee has before it the seventh periodic report of Slovakia ([CEDAW/C/SVK/7](#)).

Presentation of Report

DUŠAN MATULAY, *Permanent Representative of the Slovak Republic to the United Nations Office at Geneva and head of the delegation*, said Slovakia's most important strategic document in the area of equal treatment was the Anti-Discrimination Act, which regulated the principle of equal treatment and determined remedies for legal protection. Supporting documents included the national strategy for equality between women and men and equality of opportunities 2021–2027, and the corresponding action plan, which were created in cooperation with civil society. These documents set out the basic goals and a framework for the promotion of equality between women and men, and equal opportunity.

Another important document was the national action plan for the prevention and elimination of violence against women 2022–2027, which defined public policies to achieve a visible change in the prevention and elimination of violence against women. The plan focused on the protection of women and children experiencing violence; the prevention of violence against women; integrated policies and data collection; and effective recourse for violence against women.

The national action plan for women's employment 2022–2030 was the first of its kind and aimed to strengthen the economic independence and economic status of women and alleviate income differences between women and men. The plan also responded to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and to the situation created by the war in Ukraine and the subsequent influx of refugees, particularly women and children, into Slovakia.

In the social area, a new “pregnancy” allowance was adopted to financially support mothers and families during pregnancy. Paternity leave was introduced from November 2022, meaning a father had the right to a paid two-week after the birth of his child. Women were supported during COVID-19 through a pandemic parental allowance; allowances for children; and allowances for families in need. In 2022, the Government approved a draft regulation for increasing the capacity to provide care for children under the age of three, by 10 per cent.

In November 2021, the Slovak Government adopted a resolution apologising to women who were illegally subjected to sterilisation from 1966 to 2004, and they were provided with compensation. Extensive reforms were currently underway in Slovakia, including a new arrangement of courts. This aimed to increase the credibility of the judiciary and its performance through the enlargement of the districts of individual courts, and the creation of new causal jurisdiction and administrative courts, which would enable the specialisation of male and female judges. In 2023, the Ministry of Justice submitted proposals for two laws, which aimed to bring more legal certainty to unmarried couples.

Aside from the apology by the Government in 2021, the strategy of equality, inclusion and participation of Roma by 2030 was adopted, along with the relevant action plan. It was essential to complete the planned construction of the school infrastructure, aimed at eliminating the segregation of pupils from marginalised Roma communities by placing them into mixed classes. Several projects from the structural funds of the European Union had also been implemented, focusing on the health, housing and pre-education of marginalised Roma communities.

The Government had approved the national programme on combatting trafficking in human beings 2019–2023, with a focus on victim support. A 24-hour support hotline was secured, and victims were assisted in their return to normal life, and their integration into society and into the labour market.

There had been no changes regarding the legal regulation of abortion, and the comprehensive national programme for the protection of sexual and reproductive health rights had not been adopted, as recommended by the Committee. However, progress had been made on other recommendations from the Committee. This included the establishment of “healthy regions” organization which aimed to improve the availability of regular health services to marginalised Roma communities. This involved employing trained assistants with knowledge of the Romani language and the environment of the marginalised Romani communities. Mr. Matulay concluded by stating that Slovakia took its obligations under the Convention very seriously, and highly valued the work of the Committee.

Questions by Committee Experts

DALIA LEINARTE, *Committee Expert and Country Rapporteur for Slovakia*, asked if women in Slovakia had access to free legal aid? How well known was the Convention throughout the courts? Were there independent court cases taken in relation to gender discrimination in public and private life? Could the delegation elaborate on the ideological and social climate in Slovakia which encouraged the revision of gender equality principles in

the country? How visible was the Convention among members of parliament?

A Committee Expert commended Slovakia for the adoption in 2020 of its first national action plan on women, peace and security. Were civil society actors involved in the development of this process? What was the implementation structure and monitoring framework of this plan? What activities would the various ministries carry out? The State was commended on acts adopted to aid those fleeing Ukraine. How effectively had these laws been implemented, particularly for women, who made up 80 per cent of Ukrainian refugees? What would be the focus of the new national action plan?

Responses by the Delegation

The delegation said all international treaties ratified by the Slovak Republic, including the Convention, held precedence over national law. In case of gaps in national legislation, the international treaties on human rights were applicable. The Anti-Discrimination Act was a very sensitive document. A legislative proposal was being prepared to amend the Act by the end of the year and would be introduced by the new Government. There was a plan to organise a round table with all the important actors, including civil society. This would identify the shortcomings, which included insufficient compensation and lengthy procedures. Women in Slovakia had access to free legal aid or could be represented by the Slovak Centre for Human Rights.

The delegation said the “healthy regions” organization was working with the Slovak human rights institution to prepare new education material on discrimination in health care, including a definition. Many people did not know discrimination existed in health care. Regarding abortion, the scales currently sat more at the right of the child to life. There was a high percentage of people who belonged to the Catholic Church in Slovak society, and they had a strong influence. The Istanbul Convention had not been adopted in Slovakia. However, the legislation of the Convention was harmonised with this legislation and was applied consistently in practice.

Regarding Ukrainian refugees, there had been activities to integrate children into schools, and provide psychological support to those who needed it. A strategy had been created to integrate refugees into society. The principles were based on solidarity, non-discrimination and equal opportunities. A telephone helpline service had been provided for Ukrainian speakers, rerouting them to assistance in their own language.

Questions by Committee Experts

A Committee Expert asked when the State party planned to inform the Committee on plans to close the dialogue on follow-up communications?

DALIA LEINARTE, *Committee Expert and Country Rapporteur for Slovakia*, asked for clarification about the changes being made to the Anti-Discrimination Act?

Another Expert asked for more information on Ukrainian refugees; how would women who had been raped have access to services, such as abortion?

Responses by the Delegation

The delegation said the amendment of the Anti-Discrimination Act was in the early phase. This would be followed by the round table. The refugees from Ukraine had guaranteed access to healthcare, the same as citizens of the Slovak Republic, and could visit hospitals and medical facilities. Ukrainian women had access to abortion under certain conditions. If the pregnancy was the result of a crime being committed against the woman, the abortion was considered urgent medical care and was covered by the State.

Questions by Committee Experts

A Committee Expert said that since the national strategy on equality and the action plan had been in place for two years, could the delegation

elaborate on their success and on concrete measures that had been implemented? Were representatives from civil society involved in the development of the plan? How could non-governmental organizations receive access to resources from the horizontal principles department? Would the State party consider strengthening the mandate of the Slovak Human Rights Centre?

Another Committee Expert congratulated Slovakia for the progress it had made, including the implementation of national projects on the promotion of pre-primary education of children from marginalised Roma communities and one entitled “you have a chance too!”. These were good examples of using temporary special measures to accelerate Roma women’s substantive equality. What were the outcomes of these projects? How had the discrimination against Roma women been redressed? How did the State party evaluate the impact of these projects?

Were there plans to introduce temporary special measures to increase the female ratio to 30 per cent at the national and local legislature? Were there plans to address the gender pay gap? What other temporary special measures were envisaged, particularly for Roma, lesbian, intersex, transgender women, and women with disabilities?

Responses by the Delegation

The delegation said the national strategy on equality and the action plan relating to the equality of women and men included domestic violence and anti-discrimination efforts. Civil society had assisted with the development of the strategy, which set key political goals and measures in areas where there was inequality between women and men. There were 83 tasks outlined under the plan, which would be evaluated in November 2023.

The delegation said there was a focus on vulnerable children from low-income families, with the aim to bring them into mainstream education. The programme on the participation of Roma until 2030 sought to bring care and support to marginalised groups, developing the skills and

knowledge of children to better prepare them for pre-primary education. It would also help the literacy skills of the communities. A national programme was being implemented on pre-school education. Temporary measures had been introduced, which aimed to recruit Roma women as teachers to these schools.

Any complex reform of the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights would be considered after tenders were adopted in June 2023, to ensure that the reform would meet the criteria of the Paris Principles. The budget and personnel of the centre had been continually increased.

Questions by Committee Experts

A Committee Expert said Slovakia had criminalised domestic violence in 1999 and adopted a national action plan on the prevention of domestic violence 2022–2027. How were campaigns against hate speech being implemented? What was the status of the online portals and how did they regulate gender stereotypes? What was being done by the Government to stop sexism and hate speech in the community? What was the Government doing to prevent femicide as a crime? Were special support services available for women who were victims of domestic violence? How was international legislation pertaining to domestic violence being incorporated into national legislation?

Another Committee Expert asked what measures Slovakia planned to take to educate the judiciary on complicated trafficking laws? Would specialised judges be an idea? Could an update be provided on the draft law which proposed higher sentences for perpetrators of trafficking? Were there training programmes to create a safe victim-reporting environment? Were there specific police units to address trafficking? Did the State party acknowledge arranged forced marriages of Roma girls as cases of trafficking, and were they prosecuted as such? Was there a structure in place to identify victims of trafficking among sex workers?

Responses by the Delegation

Regarding femicide, the delegation said if a victim was in a relationship with the perpetrator, it was considered an aggravating factor, and the punishment was increased. There was no definition of domestic violence under the current Criminal Code. However, the Act on Victims' Rights included a definition of domestic violence, as a violent crime committed against a direct relative or adopted family member. Victims claiming compensation were entitled to legal aid and a court-appointed attorney. Victims also received psychological and social assistance, as well as support on all aspects of general health, a risk assessment and access to emergency housing. There were currently 10 intervention centres, one in every region. These centres were given yearly grants and helped victims to fill in requests for protection, which were then issued by the courts within 24 hours.

Victims of violent crimes could claim State compensation or compensation from the offender, after the criminal complaint had been submitted. The new Media Act that was adopted last year included online hate speech. In 2020, a national concept was adopted on the protection of children in the digital space. There was currently an action plan for 2022 and 2023 in this area. Based on the outcomes of the national action plan for violence against women, a new national action plan had been created. The topic of gender-based violence was crucial. In 2022, the Coordination Methodological Centre had prepared monitoring of administrative data on violence against women to support States in meeting victims' rights under the Istanbul Convention. Data was collected each year on domestic violence to monitor cases and prosecution in this area.

The delegation was aware about forced marriages in Roma communities; this was a tradition and culture in certain communities. To fight the problem of trafficking, brochures and leaflets about forced marriages in Slovak and Romani languages had been produced. The leaflets explained what forced marriage was as a crime, how cases could be identified, and where they could be reported, as well as where victims could seek psychological help. There was a bias when it came to Roma people and the State was committed to fighting these stereotypes. Training had been

introduced for judges on anti-Roma racism, and a definition on this form of racism had been adopted by the Slovak National Council. The National Council was advising the Government to ensure national legislation aligned with principles of anti-Roma racism.

Questions by Committee Experts and Responses by the Delegation

A Committee Expert said forced marriages of Roma girls needed to be looked at as crimes of trafficking. How often had compensation been awarded by the courts in the last five years in trafficking cases?

The delegation said that more than 15 cases of trafficking had been investigated as forced marriages. The police were alerted to most of these cases through teachers and social workers. Of the 15 cases, only one perpetrator was sentenced for two years.

A Committee Expert said women remained underrepresented in the public and private sector, particularly in decision-making positions. Next year there would be general election in Slovakia. What measures would be taken to increase the representation of women in parliament? How many women held senior positions in State-owned enterprises? When would gender parity be achieved in the State party's diplomatic service?

The delegation said as elections were approaching this September, the new parliament would have an impact on how many pieces of legislation were implemented. Women held 45 per cent of positions in foreign and diplomatic affairs, and almost half of the directors in the Ministry were females. In 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had created a new position for a coordinator of women, diversity and inclusion, which was a progressive step. The new position focused on developing new stimulus to ensure improved qualifications of women within the Ministry.

The Slovak Republic did not support setting quotas, but instead focused on supporting specific areas to ensure equality. The Government wanted to create an interactive map with the number of men and women in

various regions, to determine how to increase women's representation in politics. There were four women Ministers within the newly elected Government.

A Committee Expert said quotas were the best tool to achieve a leap in women's political participation. What did the delegation mean when they said "quotas would harm women"?

The delegation said in 2023 there would be substantially more female ambassadors. The change was ongoing and would take some time.

Questions by Committee Experts

A Committee Expert said there was a low rate of children enrolled in pre-school education; why was this, and were there plans to improve this situation? What was the existing curriculum regarding sexuality education? What was being done to encourage girls to enter into science, technology and mathematics careers? How was it ensured that refugee children received equal education? How was inclusive education for girls with disabilities ensured?

Another Committee Expert said the Committee was concerned that the gender pay gap remained at around 19 per cent, as women chose less financially rewarding jobs and earned less than men in the same positions. What was being done to target the gender pay gap? Seventy-two per cent of young Roma women were unemployed. What measures were being taken to ensure that marginalised women, including Roma women and asylum seekers, had access to long-term employment? The Committee noted that the gender equality strategy aimed to promote the equitable sharing of parental responsibilities. However, it was concerning that women who wished to return to work faced a lack of childcare facilities. What were the outcomes of the gender equality strategy regarding work/life balance? How was it ensured that all parents had access to childcare facilities? How was equal sharing of parental responsibilities ensured?

Responses by the Delegation

The delegation said the revision of the Education Act included increasing the share of children participating in pre-school education. There would be changes in the media literacy. There was a new position of digital coordinator in schools. For the first time, the definition of segregation was included in education, which was mainly focused on Roma communities. Working with the Ministry of Education, a de-segregation project targeted the schools with the most students from marginalised communities. There were also social workers appointed at schools who could intervene when necessary.

The national action plan for the employment of women was the first of its kind, and aimed to strengthen the digital skills of women; provide access to quality and inclusive education; improve access to care for children; and support the integration of disadvantaged groups, including Roma women, to the labour market. An employee could not be persecuted for filing a complaint against their employer on the grounds of rights violation. A policy for reconciling family and working life had been created, which included a catalogue of measures focusing on gender equality at work, and how to carry out audits in this respect. Career counselling had been provided to Roma women and programmes around financial literacy had been introduced. A survey had been organised on the inclusion of the Roma community.

Questions by Committee Experts

A Committee Expert said 45 per cent of Roma women had their first child before the age of 18. There were no campaigns on sexual health for teenagers. What was being done to ensure the entire population had access to healthcare? There were difficulties to have access to a high-quality abortion in Slovakia; only 33 per cent of health care services provided abortion services. Many women could not have a legal abortion due to the high cost of private hospitals. Why was only surgical abortion practiced, not medical abortion? What would be done to ensure all the

women in Slovakia, in any region or socio-economic group, had access to abortion?

Another Committee Expert asked what steps the Government was taking to increase awareness among women about pension benefits and social security, especially those from marginalised groups? How many women, especially women with disabilities and Roma women, benefitted from these services? Did the Government have data on how many women, including Roma women, could access mortgages and loans?

Responses by the Delegation

The delegation said a programme on sexual and reproductive health had not been implemented due to a lack of political consensus. It had been stuck in parliament since 2008. The healthy regions organization had 246 assistants who worked in hospitals to help Roma women through translations, and helped them understand their rights. Women in Slovakia needed to apply for an abortion from a doctor in writing. This plan would be reformed so that doctors were obligated to provide abortion services. The optimisation of the hospital network would centralise medical services, and allow for unimpeded access to abortion across the country. Slovakia did not consider the provisions of contraception to be health care, and it would not be covered by public health insurance. The healthy regions organization had certain assistants who focused specifically on educating Roma women on topics such as sexual and reproductive rights, infectious diseases, and family planning. These assistants were able to liaise with doctors to bridge the language and social barriers.

Questions by Committee Experts and Responses by the Delegation

A Committee Expert asked the delegation about a bill on affirming gender identity, which was impossible for some transgender citizens?

Another Committee Expert asked whether a new law on medical interventions covered trans people?

The delegation said there had been doctors who had sterilised trans people. A standard procedure on trans gender people had now been published which stated they did not have to be sterilised to change their gender.

A Committee Expert said the poverty rate among Roma was more than six times higher than the rest of the population. Were Roma and rural women being engaged in anti-poverty schemes? What steps had been taken to address gender sensitive reform of the criminal justice system? Could a prosecutor initiate an action on behalf of a minor who was in danger? The apology to victims of sterilisation was welcomed as a first important step. Would the State engage in collective justice for Roma women and their families to correct the human rights violations of the past?

The delegation said the amendment of the school law contained a definition of desegregation, which was supported by the courts. The Ministry of Education had a national project focused on desegregation. Although the State had adopted many measures on desegregation, the main issue was a lack of understanding of the Roma communities. The sterilisations occurred between 1990 and 2004. Slovakia had evolved since then and implemented safeguards to ensure this would not happen again. A working group had been established in 2003 which uncovered information about the illegal sterilisations. There were currently safeguards in place for investigations of these kind of cases. Roma women who had been sterilised could apply for compensation of 5,000 euros.

Closing Remarks

DUŠAN MATULAY, *Permanent Representative of the Slovak Republic to the United Nations Office at Geneva and head of the delegation*, thanked the Committee Experts for their valuable expertise and comments, as well as civil society members who had provided the Government with key

information. Slovakia looked forward to the Committee's concluding observations.

ANA PELÁEZ NARVÁEZ, *Committee Chairperson*, thanked the delegation for the constructive dialogue, which allowed the Committee to better understand the situation of women in Slovakia.

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