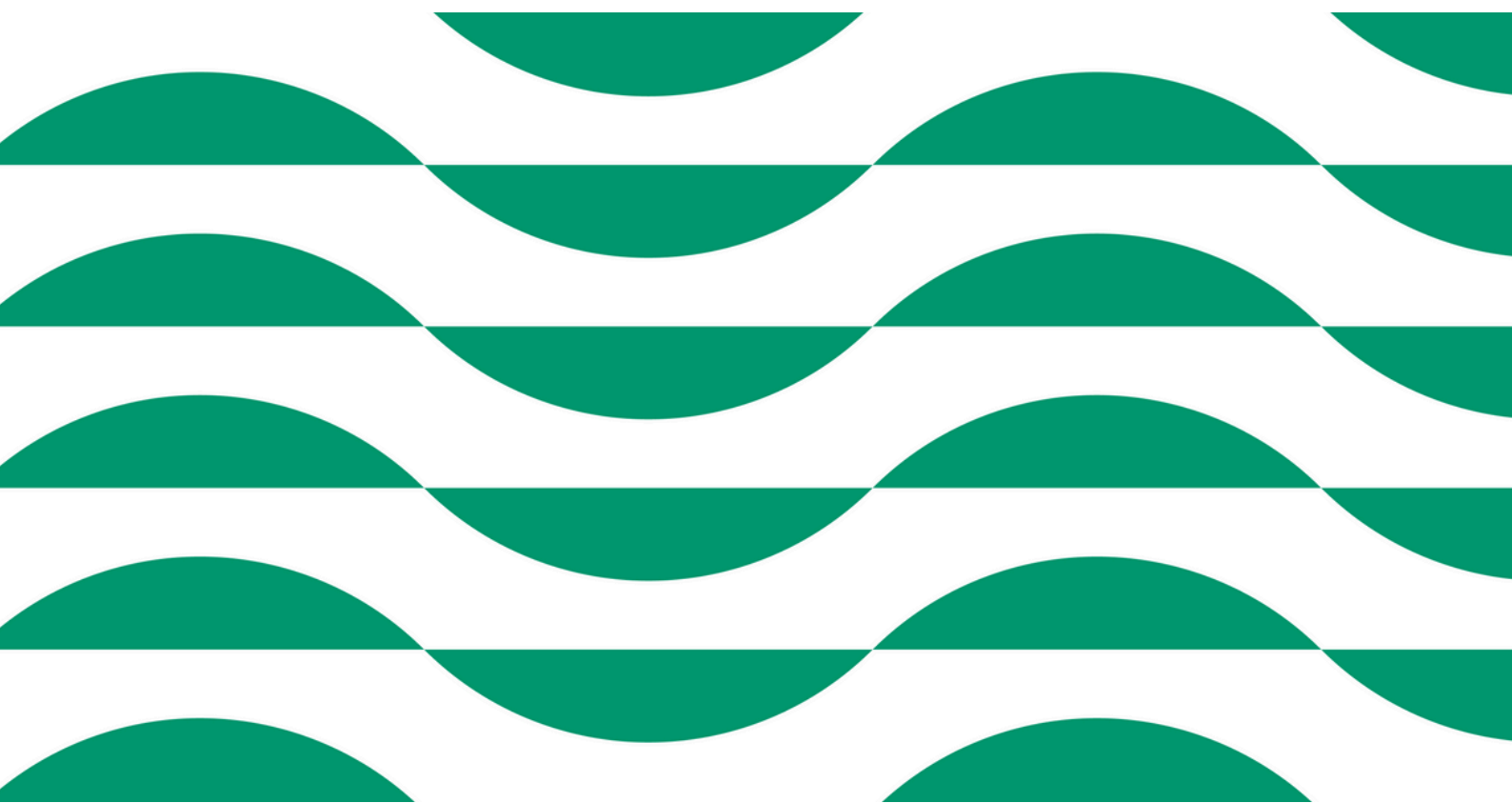


Discrimination and Violence against  
Women belonging to Communities  
Discriminated on Work and Descent  
in Accessing Livelihood Rights and Entitlements:

# THE CASE OF ROMA WOMEN IN BULGARIA



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# PREFACE

The status of Roma women in Europe remains a critical yet often marginalised issue within broader discussions of human rights and social justice. As members of one of the most historically oppressed communities, Roma women have been facing multiple layers of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, gender, civil and political and socioeconomic status.



Systemic exclusion has resulted in limited access to education, healthcare, employment, and political representation, reinforcing cycles of poverty and social marginalisation.

Despite legal protections both in Bulgaria and at the European level, including anti-discrimination laws and human rights frameworks, deeply ingrained prejudices continue to hinder the full inclusion of Roma women in society. They are disproportionately affected by issues such as early and forced marriage, gender-based violence, and inadequate access to public services. Structural racism, institutional neglect, and societal biases further exacerbate their vulnerability, limiting their opportunities for personal and collective advancement.

This report, presented by the Global Forum of Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent, provides a comprehensive analysis of the lived experiences of Roma women across Bulgaria, shedding light on the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender in shaping their social realities.

It highlights the structural barriers they face while recognising their resilience, agency, and the grassroots movements advocating for their rights. Case studies, statistical insights, and policy evaluations offer a nuanced understanding of the challenges and progress.

By amplifying the voices of Roma women and acknowledging their struggles and resilience stories, this report aims to serve as a resource for policymakers, human rights organisations, and civil society actors. It calls for urgent and sustained efforts to dismantle systemic discrimination and to foster inclusive policies that ensure dignity, justice, and equal opportunities for Roma women across Europe.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than 270 million people across the world are discriminated against based on work, descent and/or face caste-based discrimination.

Communities Discriminated on Work and Descent (CDWD)[2] are some of the most excluded, segregated, and marginalised groups at the global and local levels within their social, economic, political, and cultural systems. The consequences of this marginalisation include deprivation and systematic exclusion from education, health, and access to water and sanitation, employment, voting rights, equal access to land and housing, and access to religious institutions in the public sphere. These types of social structures have led to systemic violence for centuries against CDWD[3] such as Roma in Europe; the Haratine in the Sahel; Osu in Nigeria, Forgeron in West Africa; Bantu in Sudan; Burakumin in Japan; Dalits (formerly known as 'untouchables') in South Asia; and Quilombo and Palenque in Latin America.

Roma, one of the largest communities discriminated against based on work and descent in Europe, face structural obstacles in accessing their rights. In a Europe that prides itself on its commitment to diversity, equality, and human rights, the persistence of

discrimination against Roma communities, discriminated on work and descent, stands as a stark reminder of the challenges that still lie ahead.

Roma, a historically marginalised and resilient ethnic group, have long faced systemic discrimination and prejudice across Europe.

This report is not merely intended to highlight the problems, but also to underscore the potential for change. Through research, data analysis, and personal testimonies, it aims to spark meaningful discussions on the urgent need for targeted policies, increased societal awareness, and international collaboration. Romani communities in Bulgaria are diverse, with no uniform traditions or occupations across the groups.

# CHAPTER 1:

## GENERAL STATUS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY, ESPECIALLY WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SELECTED SDGS AREAS

This chapter explores the barriers Romani women and girls face in achieving equity and inclusion, specifically within the framework of selected Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These barriers result from systemic forms of discrimination that intersect with gender, race, and socio-economic status, disproportionately affecting Romani women and girls within these communities.

By exploring the interplay of traditional practices, structural inequities, and cultural norms, this chapter highlights Romani women and girls' challenges in accessing healthcare, education, employment, housing, and water and sanitation. These issues are compounded by social hierarchies, entrenched poverty, and exclusionary policies, perpetuating cycles of inequality and marginalisation.

The primary aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic and cultural contexts shaping the lives of CDWD communities, with a specific focus on gender disparities. It underscores how systemic discrimination affects access to essential services and opportunities, contributing to broader discussions about equity and human rights within the SDG framework.



### RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The 2020 Bulgarian Roma civil monitor Report identified persistent challenges in the area of Roma education, including educational segregation, high dropout rates, and the underrepresentation of Roma culture and language in school curricula. Structural factors such as poverty, social isolation, and teacher biases were also noted as significant barriers. A lack of ethnically disaggregated data and inadequate monitoring mechanisms further hindered progress, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of implemented measures.

Segregation in education remains one of the main problems that disturb the education of Roma children in Bulgaria. The National Roma Strategic Framework points out that “Despite the improvement of the educational structure of the population, there are still some challenges, as well as alarming signals for the quality of education. The share of Roma students attending schools with mixed ethnicities has almost halved. The share of students in schools where there is a concentration of students of Roma origin is increasing – almost every second child of Roma ethnic origin is enrolled in a school where Roma predominate.” It also outlines the main negative factors before the quality education of Roma, including the “Primarily segregated educational institutions” and “the expanding process of the so-called secondary segregation of educational institutions.” A survey conducted by Center Amalipe and Ministry of Education in 2020 shows that 1080 schools are with “concentration of vulnerable students” (a term used by MES for students whose parents have less than secondary education). Most of them are rural schools while 185 general schools and 150 VET gimnasiums could be defined as “segregated / in process of segregation” being situated in cities or towns with more than one school.

Projects for desegregation and prevention of segregation are part of the annual programs and the strategy of the Center for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities. The amount is also very low – the entire budget of the Center is 500,000 euros annually, and it has not been raised since 2006. The amount for desegregation projects is around 100,000 euros.

Discrimination against Romani girls occurs at multiple levels—teachers, peers, and school administrators often perpetuate societal biases. Girls face segregation and stigmatisation tied to socio-economic status, gender, and cultural identity, further marginalising them and limiting educational attainment (UNICEF, 2016). Systemic challenges within educational institutions, including discriminatory practices and institutional bias, further hinder their educational opportunities (UNICEF, 2016).

Despite these barriers, some progress is being made. Families increasingly prioritise girls' education in regions like Montana, achieving results comparable to the national average. In contrast, areas such as Sliven still struggle with early marriage practices and high dropout rates, emphasising the need for localised, community-based interventions tailored to specific challenges (UNICEF, 2016).



Government policies often emphasise punitive measures, such as sanctions against families for non-compliance with school attendance, rather than addressing root causes through supportive interventions.

Furthermore, institutional efforts usually focus on traditional practices like child marriage as key contributors to dropouts, shifting the responsibility from governmental and systemic failures to the communities themselves.

Throughout the years, numerous governmental strategies and action plans have been implemented to address the educational challenges faced by Romani children:

### **National Strategies:**

National Strategy for the Child (2008–2018)

National Strategy for Demographic Development (2012–2030)

Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2013–2020)

Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities

National Roma Integration Strategy (2012–2020)

UNICEF–Bulgaria’s Country Programme Action Plan (2013–2017)

The National Development Program Bulgaria 2030 and its implementation plan introduce specific measures for inclusive education, effective implementation of mechanisms to ensure that all children are integrated into the education system, promoting social cohesion among different societal groups, and providing adequate housing conditions, among others. Despite these strategic policy developments, there is a lack of information on implementing the planned measures and their impacts.

These documents focus on combating child marriage, improving access to education, and creating inclusive environments for disadvantaged groups, particularly Romani girls.

Research from a decade ago highlights disparities in educational attainment among Roma populations. For instance, only 0.29% of Roma achieved a university education, and 5.82% graduated from secondary school. Illiteracy rates were particularly concerning, with Roma females being twice as likely to be illiterate compared to their male counterparts (2016). Roma participation in higher education has risen steadily in Bulgaria for the last 15 years, with recently published data indicating that participation rates have now reached 2,6% and even come to 5,4% for the 21–25 age group (Angelova, Dimitrova, Yordanova, Pamporov, Lyubomirova, Terziyska, 2020).

As of 2019, 22.7% of Roma have graduated from high school and 2.6% from university. This represents a significant increase from the prior decade (as for 2011, respectively – 13.5% and 0.4%), but there is still a way to narrow the educational gap. As of 2021, the average for the country is 54% high school graduation and 29% university graduates (Angelova, Dimitrova, Yordanova, Pamporov, Lyubomirova, Terziyska, 2020).

Multiple systemic barriers to access to education:

- **Economic Challenges:** Poverty and unemployment limit families' ability to support children's education.
- **Discrimination:** Prejudiced attitudes in schools and society discourage participation and foster alienation.
- **Migration:** High mobility disrupts schooling continuity.
- **Infrastructure Deficits:** Rural areas often lack secondary schools, forcing children to travel long distances or drop out.

In 2022, individuals who identified as Roma continued to experience the highest levels of poverty in Bulgaria, with nearly two-thirds (63.2%) living below the poverty line. Among children aged 0–17, 25.9% were classified as being at risk of poverty, and this figure rose significantly among those facing material deprivation, where 43.5% were similarly at risk. Ethnic disparities in the ability to meet children's basic needs are striking: 23% of children from the Bulgarian majority, 33% of those from the Turkish minority, and a staggering 76.2% of Roma children lacked access to essential resources.

Complete deprivation—defined as unmet needs across all thirteen child welfare indicators—was recorded in 1.2% of Bulgarian children, 0.8% of Turkish children, and 9% of Roma children. Furthermore, material hardship closely correlates with poverty risk: 24% of materially deprived

children from the Bulgarian majority were also living in poverty, compared to 37.5% among the Turkish minority and 69.4% among Roma children.

To enhance Romani girls' access to education, it is vital to address both structural inequalities and community-specific social norms.

Approaches that spotlight positive developments and promote change from within Roma communities can help lower dropout rates and reduce the prevalence of early and forced marriages. In doing so, Romani girls will be better positioned to pursue their education and fully realise their potential.



## REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL TRENDS

### Montana Region:

- **Educational Achievements:** This region demonstrates the highest levels of educational success among Romani girls, particularly the Kalaydzhii subgroup, whose attainment levels align closely with the broader society.
- **Challenges:** Groups like Koshnichari and Muhchii face persistent issues, including poverty, low family motivation, and child marriages.

### Sliven Region:

- **Educational Gaps:** Sliven reports the lowest educational outcomes, especially in districts like Nadezhda and Nova Zagora, where child marriages remain prevalent.
- **Neighbourhood Disparities:** While some girls in areas like Nikola Kochev District pursue university degrees, dropout rates remain alarmingly high in neighbourhoods like Nadezhda.

### Shumen Region:

- **Improvements:** Over 15 years, urban families have increasingly prioritised secondary education, reflecting a shift in attitudes.
- **Barriers for Rural Girls:** In rural areas, the lack of secondary schools and fears of behavioural issues when girls leave family supervision continue to hinder progress.

## POSITIVE TRENDS IN ROMA EDUCATION

Recent studies underscore notable improvements in educational attainment among Roma, driven by both economic aspirations and organisational initiatives:

### Higher Education Gains:

- **Junior Secondary School Completion:** Increased from 36.2% (2011) to 43.2% (2019).
- **University Education:** A sixfold increase rose from 0.4% (2011) to 2.6% (2019).
- **Roma participation in higher education** rates have now reached 2,6% and even come to 5,4% for the 21-25 age group

### Educational Aspirations:

- **Secondary Education:** Aspirations rose from 63% to 66% for boys and from 59.6% to 61% for girls between 2011 and 2019.
- **Higher Education:** Aspirations nearly doubled during the same period, signalling a cultural shift among younger generations.

### School Attendance:

- **Participation rates** have improved across all age groups:
- **Ages 7–10:** Increased from 78.6% (2011) to 95.3% (2019).
- **Ages 15–18:** Rose from 43.9% (2011) to 63% (2019).



These findings highlight significant progress in education and employment among Roma communities, particularly within younger generations. Early education fosters long-term benefits, emphasising the need for sustained investment in inclusive policies and community-led initiatives. Addressing persistent challenges while building on positive trends offers a pathway to empower Romani girls and close the educational gap.

The right to education for Romani women and girls remains a critical challenge due to systemic discrimination, socio-economic barriers, and cultural norms. While some progress has been made in addressing these issues, much work remains to ensure equitable access to quality education for marginalised groups like Romani girls in Bulgaria. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach, combining supportive policies, community engagement, and systemic reform to dismantle barriers and create opportunities for all.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Expand Access to Early Education:**

- Increase investment in kindergartens and early childhood programs in Romani communities.
- Provide financial incentives such as scholarships and free transportation.

- **Combat Discrimination in Schools:**

- Train educators and administrators on inclusive teaching practices.
- Establish clear anti-bullying protocols to protect Romani children.

- **Address Cultural and Socio-Economic Barriers:**

- Engage with community leaders to address harmful norms like child marriage.
- Provide targeted support for Romani girls to complete secondary and higher education.



## RIGHT TO EMPLOYMENT

Roma in Bulgaria continue to face significant barriers in accessing fair and equitable employment opportunities. Discrimination, rooted in deep-seated prejudices, is prevalent at multiple levels of the labour market. Roma often encounter dismissive or rude behaviour, lack of assistance with documentation, unjustified delays or denials of services, and unwarranted sanctions. Roma are frequently seen as a "last resort" for hiring, leading to a reluctance to apply for jobs due to the expectation of degrading treatment. Many Roma are forced to conceal their identity to secure better positions. Many Roma experience racism and prejudice from employers, colleagues, and clients. Fear of retaliation and distrust in institutions often deter Roma from reporting discriminatory acts, leaving many incidents unaddressed.

Roma are disproportionately represented in low-paid, unskilled jobs, often in seasonal sectors such as construction, agriculture, and cleaning. Pay inequality is a widespread issue, with many Roma earning less than their non-Roma colleagues for equivalent work.

Roma frequently engage in informal work without contracts, social protections, or adequate wages. Those practising traditional crafts face declining demand, while access to credit and financing remains a significant barrier for self-employed Roma. The lack of formal labour contracts is a common problem for Roma workers, leading to exploitation, unsafe working environments, and limited access to social protections. Even with contracts, workplace safety standards are often ignored.

Limited access to training programs hinders the career progression of Roma workers. Most employers do not prioritise skill development, and the training provided by employment offices often fails to meet labour market demands.

Roma are underrepresented in trade unions, limiting their ability to advocate for fair treatment and address workplace discrimination. Efforts to include Roma in leadership roles remain sporadic and lack targeted strategies to address their specific challenges.

EU membership has enabled many Roma to seek work abroad. While some have improved their living standards, others remain trapped in exploitative conditions without proper contracts or protections, perpetuating economic vulnerability.

Government job programs targeting Roma often offer only temporary relief without fostering long-term employment or development. Social enterprises show potential for sustainable solutions but lack consistent state support.

The Roma community in Bulgaria faces systemic barriers to accessing decent and sustainable employment, compounded by widespread poverty, limited education, and discrimination. The unemployment rate among Roma remains disproportionately high, estimated at 50-60% depending on the region, with a significant gender disparity. Many Roma work in low-paying, unstable jobs without labour contracts or social protections, and temporary or seasonal employment dominates their labour market participation.

Among Roma aged 15-29, 53.6% are classified as not in education, employment, or training (NEET), compared to 11.7% for ethnic Bulgarians and 22.5% for ethnic Turks. Gendered data reveal that 69.8% of young Roma women fall into the NEET category, starkly contrasting with 39.5% of young Roma men.

**Only 47.2% of Roma aged 20-64 are employed or active in the labour market, compared to 80.2% of Bulgarians and 65.1% of Turks in the same age group.**

There is a 32.2 percentage-point gap between Roma men and women in employment, significantly higher than the gender employment gaps among Bulgarians (6.7 percentage points) and Turks (18.1 percentage points).

Most Roma engage in unskilled jobs, predominantly in:

- Construction: As labourers, often without professional certification.
- Agriculture: Seasonal work such as harvest collection.
- Services: Cleaning, janitorial, and low-skilled roles in hospitality.

Despite demand for skilled labour in certain sectors, Roma often lack access to training due to rigid educational prerequisites for professional certification.

Romani women and girls face significant barriers to equitable employment due to economic marginalisation, societal discrimination, and gender norms.

Romani women are disproportionately employed in informal, low-wage jobs with limited prospects for career advancement. These roles, such as waste collection, domestic work, and hazardous industry labour, are physically demanding, socially stigmatised, and often exploitative. Roma women face intersecting barriers of gender and ethnic discrimination. They are disproportionately affected by unemployment and economic inactivity due to:

- High NEET Rates: Nearly 70% of young Roma women are not engaged in education, employment, or training, often due to traditional gender roles and early marriage.
- Limited Access to Support: Social programs fail to address the unique needs of Roma women, such as childcare support or flexible training options.
- Employment Disparities: Roma women are less likely to secure permanent employment or participate in labour migration compared to Roma men.

A nationally representative survey commissioned by the Trust for Social Achievement (TSA) provides valuable insights into the educational and employment outcomes of Roma communities in Bulgaria, offering critical policy and program development data.

## LABOUR MARKET CHALLENGES

- Bulgaria's labour force is projected to decline by 40% by 2050.
- Many adults risk being unprepared for employment due to inadequate education and skills.
- The share of employed Roma doubled from 19% in 2011 to 45% in 2019.
- School attendance significantly impacts employment and income:
  - Employment rates are 40% higher for those who attended kindergarten.
  - Income increases by 30% with early education.
- Higher education graduates frequently secure managerial positions.
- Secondary education enhances opportunities for skilled work and entrepreneurship.

## BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

- **Low Education Levels:** The majority of Roma have only primary or lower education, restricting access to skilled or well-paying jobs.
- **Informal Economy Dependence:** Atypical employment is widespread, with many Roma working without contracts or social protections, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.
- **Administrative Hurdles:** Strict education requirements prevent enrollment in vocational courses, even for professions requiring no advanced qualifications.

Though Roma formally have the right to unemployment benefits, barriers include:

- **Exclusion from Unemployment Benefits:** Many Roma lack the requisite formal employment history or social security contributions.
- **Limited Social Assistance:** Social assistance programs impose rigid conditions, such as mandatory community service and income reporting, discouraging participation.

Many Roma opt for informal work (e.g., waste collection, occasional labour) over navigating the burdensome requirements of social assistance, particularly as informal earnings often surpass benefits. Roma workers, such as construction labourers, who already possess practical skills, are denied professional qualification certificates due to inadequate education levels (e.g., not completing 6th grade). This prevents them from formalising their expertise, forcing reliance on informal employment.

Many young Roma families forego social benefits due to the minimal financial support offered and restrictive conditions, opting instead for informal income-generating activities like herb collection.

Addressing employment inequalities among Roma in Bulgaria, particularly for women, requires systemic changes, including:

Remove unnecessary educational prerequisites for skill-based certifications and provide accessible training programs.

Introduce gender-sensitive programs addressing childcare needs and job flexibility for Roma women.

Expand opportunities for stable, contract-based work and promote inclusion in public and private sector hiring.

Simplify access to benefits and reduce punitive measures to encourage participation among marginalized Roma families. To address the systemic barriers faced by Roma in the labor market, it is essential to:

Strengthen anti-discrimination enforcement in employment offices and workplaces.

Promote targeted vocational training and professional development opportunities for Roma.

Increase Roma representation in trade unions to advocate for equitable treatment.

Support social enterprises and entrepreneurship among Roma through consistent funding and mentorship programs.

Enhance monitoring and evaluation of employment measures in national strategies, ensuring alignment with the needs of Roma communities.

Eliminate rigid educational prerequisites for skill-based certifications.

Offer targeted vocational programs with flexible schedules and childcare support.

Create tax incentives for businesses hiring Romani women.

Launch public-private partnerships to integrate Romani workers into high-demand sectors.

Provide microloans and mentorship programs tailored to Romani women.

Establish social enterprises focusing on skills enhancement and stable employment.



## RIGHT TO HOUSING

Roma communities in Bulgaria are disproportionately affected by substandard living conditions, marked by overcrowded, unsanitary, and informal housing. These inadequate housing situations are not only a result of social and economic exclusion but also exacerbate maternal and child health outcomes, particularly impacting Roma women and girls. The following analysis highlights Roma's key challenges in terms of housing, the specific vulnerabilities of Roma women, and potential solutions.

Roma communities in Bulgaria are often relegated to neighbourhoods that lack basic infrastructure such as clean water, sanitation, electricity, and waste management. According to the World Bank's 2021 report, these deprived neighbourhoods contribute significantly to a cycle of social exclusion, as they are typically characterised by overcrowding, poor-quality housing, and inadequate amenities. Many Roma families struggle to afford necessary housing improvements, making it difficult for them to escape the cycle of deprivation. These conditions are starkly different from non-segregated, non-Roma areas, where better infrastructure and living conditions prevail.

For Roma women, these housing conditions have direct health implications. The absence of sanitation and access to clean water increases the risk of infections and diseases, adversely affecting maternal and child health.

Roma women, who often bear the primary responsibility for household chores such as water collection and maintaining sanitation, face disproportionate challenges in overcrowded and poorly equipped homes.

Housing deprivation is deeply linked to broader social exclusion, which includes low employment rates, limited access to education, and poor health outcomes. Roma women are often doubly disadvantaged due to their gender and ethnicity. They are typically responsible for managing the household in overcrowded, informal housing, which can exacerbate stress, mental health issues, and gender inequality within the family structure. The lack of access to basic services such as healthcare and education limits their empowerment and social mobility opportunities.

Moreover, the legal and administrative barriers faced by Roma families in Bulgaria prevent them from improving their living conditions. A law passed in 2014 prohibits illegal buildings from being connected to public utilities, including water and electricity, preventing many Roma from obtaining identification cards necessary for accessing healthcare, education, and social services. This legal vulnerability leaves Roma women in precarious positions, unable to secure their rights or access basic services.

## FORCED EVICTIONS AND DEMOLITIONS

Roma families are particularly vulnerable to forced evictions and demolitions. Between 2017 and 2020, thousands of Roma homes were demolished, often without offering alternative accommodation. These demolitions disproportionately affected Roma women and children, who were left homeless and without support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the health crisis, demolitions continued, exacerbating the already dire living conditions. In many cases, Roma women and their children were displaced without access to social support or compensation, further deepening their vulnerability.

The housing situation of Roma women and girls in Bulgaria is emblematic of broader social and economic inequalities rooted in systemic discrimination. The substandard living conditions, legal barriers, and ethnic tensions they face in accessing adequate housing exacerbate their vulnerability, particularly during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Comprehensive, long-term strategies are required to break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion. These strategies should focus on improving access to basic services, providing legal recognition, and fostering community-driven housing solutions that centre the needs and voices of Roma women. By addressing the root causes of housing insecurity, it is possible to create a more inclusive and equitable future for Roma communities in Bulgaria.

Anti-Roma sentiment and ethnic tensions play a significant role in hindering efforts to improve housing conditions in Roma neighbourhoods. Public resistance to housing investments targeted at Roma communities has led to violent demonstrations and social unrest, complicating efforts to address housing issues. Roma women are often caught at the intersection of these prejudices, facing discrimination not only due to their ethnicity but also because of their gender. The result is a lack of political will to implement inclusive and transparent housing policies, which leaves Roma communities, particularly women, without reliable and secure housing options.

## THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND EU FUNDS

Government strategies to address the housing crisis, such as the 2018 National Housing Strategy and the National Strategy for Roma Integration, have acknowledged the need for improved housing but have largely failed to implement substantial change. Roma families, particularly women, are often excluded from social housing programs, and EU funds intended for Roma housing projects are sometimes diverted to other purposes.



In addition, inconsistent efforts to legalise Roma homes or issue tolerance certificates leave many Roma families in a state of uncertainty, unable to secure long-term housing solutions.

To improve housing conditions for Roma communities, several measures can be taken:

A temporary ban on demolitions until the law is updated to protect Roma families from forced evictions.

Introduce a moratorium on forced evictions and provide alternative accommodations.

Making it easier for Roma families to legalise stable residential buildings and reducing penalties for illegal housing. Simplify the process for legalising informal housing.

Implementing national strategies to combat anti-Roma prejudice and promote inclusive housing policies at all levels of government.

Strengthening the enforcement of European Court of Human Rights rulings to protect Roma families from forced evictions and ensuring that EU funds are directed toward Roma housing projects. Allocate EU funds for integrated housing projects with oversight to prevent

Ensure that municipal development plans consider the specific housing needs of Roma communities and prioritise inclusive policies that promote ethnic integration. Prioritise basic services like clean water, sanitation, and electricity in Romani neighbourhoods. Advocate for inclusive urban planning that promotes ethnic integration.

## RIGHT TO HEALTHCARE, SANITATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Romani women in Bulgaria face intersecting barriers to healthcare, sanitation, and environmental safety, which result in severe inequities. Systemic discrimination, poor living conditions, and limited access to resources exacerbate their vulnerability and undermine their fundamental rights. Romani women have shorter life expectancies compared to non-Romani women in Bulgaria. These disparities are primarily driven by unequal access to healthcare, malnutrition, and environmental hazards, illustrating the cumulative effects of systemic discrimination and exclusion.

The Ministry of Health has developed targeted documents addressing health-related issues among Roma, including high rates of tuberculosis and hepatitis, limited access to healthcare services, lack of health insurance, and challenges in maternal and child health.

These include the National Program for Improving Maternal and Child Healthcare 2021–2030 the National Program for the Prevention and Control of Viral Hepatitis in Bulgaria 2021–2030 and the National Program for the Prevention and Control of Tuberculosis in Bulgaria 2021–2025.

Despite national strategies aimed at reducing disparities, Romani women experience significant challenges accessing healthcare. Economic hardships, discriminatory practices, and lack of legal documentation compound these difficulties. Low health insurance coverage excludes many Romani women from essential services like prenatal and maternal care, further entrenching health inequities. Although Bulgarian law provides for three free pregnancy consultations for all women, many

Romani women are unaware of this entitlement or face refusal and neglect when attempting to access these services. This demonstrates a failure in both outreach and equitable implementation of healthcare policies.

Research by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) reveals pervasive segregation in maternity wards, with 54 of 63 Romani women interviewed being placed in overcrowded and poorly maintained "Roma rooms." These wards lacked essential amenities like hot water, soap, and adequate medical equipment.

**Hospital staff often justified segregation with harmful stereotypes, labelling Romani women as unhygienic or irresponsible.**

In some cases, Romani women were placed in "isolator" rooms intended for infectious disease patients. These actions were accompanied by verbal abuse, denial of pain relief, and even physical mistreatment during childbirth, exemplifying systemic racism and gender-based violence in healthcare.

Access to clean water and sanitation remains a pressing issue for Romani communities. Many settlements lack piped water and sewage systems, overwhelmingly burdening women responsible for caregiving and household tasks. Environmental degradation, unregulated waste management, and proximity to industrial sites expose Romani women to heightened health risks. Climate change intensifies these challenges by exacerbating resource scarcity and environmental hazards, further marginalising vulnerable populations.



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND INTERNATIONAL OVERSIGHT

The European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) has criticised Bulgaria for failing to uphold Romani women's healthcare rights under the European Social Charter. Violations include health insurance disparities and ethnic segregation in healthcare settings. However, the ECSR stopped short of declaring systemic discrimination.

The Bulgarian government has introduced measures, such as appointing 195 health mediators to address language and cultural barriers. Yet, these efforts remain inadequate in addressing the root causes of systemic racism and inequality in healthcare.

The consistent neglect, segregation, and abuse faced by Romani women in healthcare reflect structural racism and systemic inequality. These practices violate fundamental human rights, including the right to dignity, non-discrimination, and equitable access to healthcare.

The intersection of racial, gender, and economic discrimination demands urgent policy reform, accountability, and comprehensive strategies to ensure that healthcare systems uphold the principles of equity and justice

## RIGHT TO SAFETY, SECURITY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

The physical, psychological, and social impacts of violence against CDWD women and girls are severe. For example, in Bulgaria, the systemic nature of exploitation contributes to a lack of legal protections and societal safety nets for vulnerable groups, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalisation.

For Romani women, the vulnerability is further exacerbated by poverty, marginalisation, and a lack of protective legal mechanisms, particularly in Eastern Europe. Harmful traditional practices perpetuate cycles of gender-based violence. Within Romani communities in Bulgaria, child marriage is an example of this entrenched inequality. Approximately 8.4% of adolescents aged 15-19 in Bulgaria are married, much higher than the European average of 2%. This practice is often driven by poverty, cultural norms around virginity, and limited access to education.

In recent years, there has been a notable rise in neo-Nazi groups in countries like Bulgaria where Roma communities have been particularly targeted. Roma individuals and families have been victims of violent attacks, some of which were explicitly linked to the glorification of Nazi-era figures or neo-Nazi movements. For example, in July 2023, Bulgaria's Commission for Protection against Discrimination fined the VMRO-BND party for promoting derogatory statements about the Roma community. In this case, the VMRO-BND party, an extremist political group, posted online content that perpetuated harmful stereotypes and discriminatory views about the Roma people. These statements, made on social media platforms, echoed far-right rhetoric and contributed to an environment of hostility and incitement of hatred toward Roma communities. The Bulgarian authorities' response, which led to the party being fined for promoting hate speech under Bulgarian law, signals an important step toward accountability for online hate speech and neo-Nazi glorification.

Bulgaria's Constitution lacks specific provisions protecting Romani women and girls or addressing ethnicity-based vulnerabilities. While Bulgaria has ratified the Istanbul Convention, it was not implemented due to opposition from anti-gender advocacy coalitions. The Constitutional Court's decision to declare the Istanbul Convention unconstitutional reflected a broader cultural divide, with conservative beliefs dominating public discourse. This has left marginalised communities, including Romani women, without crucial protections against gender-based violence.

However, some progress has been made. On July 21, 2023, the Bulgarian Parliament amended the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, introducing measures aligned with Council of Europe standards. These changes resulted from awareness-raising efforts by organisations like the Bulgarian Platform of the European Women's Lobby. Despite these advances, there is still no emphasis on marginalised communities or Romani women.

Bulgaria had transposed the Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA on combating racism and xenophobia into national legislation. Articles 162 and 163 of the Bulgarian Criminal Code address hate speech and hate crimes related to race, nationality, or ethnic origin. However, the official monitoring report on the implementation of the previous National Roma Strategic Framework (NRSF) 2012-2020 highlighted significant shortcomings, particularly in the rule of law and anti-discrimination areas. The report concluded that, "The definitions of goals, certain objectives, and the administrative reports on their implementation deepen discrimination rather than mitigating it."



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This analysis highlights the systemic barriers faced by Romani women and girls in accessing fundamental rights such as education, employment, and housing. These challenges, deeply rooted in intersecting forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, perpetuate cycles of exclusion and marginalisation. Despite some progress in educational attainment, labor market participation, and housing improvements, significant disparities remain.

The findings underscore the critical role of addressing these inequities through systemic reforms, inclusive policies, and targeted interventions. Sustainable progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires a multidimensional approach that empowers Romani women and girls, addresses structural discrimination, and fosters community-driven solutions.

### General Recommendations:

#### **Strengthen Anti-Discrimination Policies:**

- Enforce existing anti-discrimination laws with a focus on ethnicity and gender.
- Implement public awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and antigypsyism.

#### **Promote Inclusive Community Engagement:**

- Foster collaboration between governments, NGOs, and Romani communities.
- Encourage the active participation of Romani women in decision-making processes.

#### **Disaggregate Data Collection:**

- Invest in data collection systems that capture gender and ethnic disparities.
- Use evidence-based findings to design and evaluate policy interventions.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers, civil society, and international stakeholders can collectively work toward dismantling barriers and creating a more equitable and inclusive society for Romani women and girls.

## CHAPTER 2: STATUS OF CDWD WOMEN & GIRLS AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE ADMINISTRATION IN BULGARIA

The criminal justice system in Bulgaria is closely connected to political representation. Women's political representation in the parliament and administration reflects women's access to protection and rights. However, significant gaps persist, particularly for marginalised groups such as Romani women and girls.

Considering that nearly 10% of the Bulgarian population is Roma, Romani women and girls constitute a significant portion of this demographic. These women face intersectional discrimination, rooted in both their ethnic identity and gender. Their experiences highlight critical deficiencies within the justice system and the broader societal structure.

Roma women in Bulgaria are perceived as highly vulnerable to forced prostitution, trafficking, abuse, and violence. They are also at higher risk of early pregnancies and marriages. The European Union (EU) and its member states have increasingly focused on the specific situation of Roma women, emphasising their role in promoting inclusion. Principle number five of the EU's 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion underscores the need to address multiple discrimination and improve access to social services for Roma women.

Reports and stakeholder interviews indicate that Roma women face greater societal discrimination and exclusion than other women and Roma men. They are disproportionately affected during forced evictions and are at heightened risk of trafficking and exploitation, including for forced labour and sexual purposes. Ethnic-based data on women and juveniles in detention is limited, making it difficult to comprehensively assess their specific challenges. Anecdotal evidence suggests that approximately 85% of women in prison are ethnic Roma, indicating a significant overrepresentation. Additionally, there is a lack of reintegration programs for those who have served their sentences.

Roma women and men often have limited knowledge of laws and regulations, as well as the mechanisms available for addressing discrimination. Existing initiatives by NGOs and other institutions fail to meet the needs of Roma communities for redress mechanisms, free legal aid, or assistance through national human rights institutions (NHRIs). Fear of retaliation or further marginalisation also prevents many Roma from filing complaints. For example, in cases of discrimination by local general practitioners, the lack of alternative medical options discourages seeking redress.

Other legal issues faced by Roma communities include family law-related challenges. Many Roma do not have official marriage certificates, which classifies women as single mothers and creates barriers to accessing the social system. Similarly, children born abroad often lack birth certificates, and many Roma families lack property deeds and housing documents.

### **BARRIERS TO LEGAL AID FOR ROMA WOMEN IN BULGARIA**

A comprehensive report by Johnsen (2024) highlights the barriers Roma women face in accessing legal aid and services, identifying the following primary obstacles:

- Traditional attitudes within Roma communities normalise domestic and gender-based violence, restricting women's ability to seek help or escape harmful environments.
- Social confinement to Roma neighbourhoods limits exposure to public authorities and services, leaving women inexperienced in navigating institutional systems.
- Pervasive poverty, illiteracy, and language barriers diminish Roma women's capacity to articulate legal concerns and claim their rights.
- Economic dependence, driven by the gender pay gap and barriers to employment, prevents women from affording or prioritising legal services.
- A gender digital divide exacerbates access issues, with women owning less technology and lacking support to use it effectively.
- Institutions fail to provide user-friendly mechanisms for filing complaints or accessing information, leaving women insecure and hesitant to engage with public systems.
- Ethnic discrimination in workplaces and public institutions discourages Roma women from seeking or benefiting from legal aid.
- A lack of trust in state institutions further alienates them, making it difficult to address legal or social problems.
- The pandemic intensified existing challenges, confining women to their homes, increasing domestic violence, and further isolating them from support systems.

Given the prevalence of legal issues and widespread illiteracy among Roma women, their need for accessible legal aid is urgent. However, current schemes often fail due to systemic gaps and a lack of tailored services. Reforms could include:

- **Improving Access and Awareness:** Simplifying institutional processes and providing clear, accessible information in languages understood by Roma women.
- **Building Trust:** Engaging community-based organisations as intermediaries between Roma women and state institutions.
- **Addressing Economic Barriers:** Introducing targeted subsidies or free legal aid for women from impoverished communities.
- **Enhancing Digital Access:** Bridging the gender digital divide through training programs and affordable technology.
- **Strengthening Legal Frameworks:** Adopting zero-tolerance policies for discrimination and ensuring effective enforcement mechanisms.

A notable initiative is the Equal Opportunities Initiative's Legal Program, which provides legal protection and assistance to Roma in cases of discrimination and human rights violations. This programme encompasses consultations, strategic litigation in Bulgarian and international courts, and advocacy aimed at improving legislation. It also features non-discrimination training for various target groups and monitors the situation of the Roma community in priority areas, including education, employment, health, and housing. The program is financially supported by the Open Society Foundations and the Sigrid Rausing Trust.

Addressing the barriers faced by Roma women in accessing legal aid and justice requires a multi-faceted approach. By reforming legal aid schemes, simplifying institutional processes, and prioritising the voices of Roma women in policy-making, Bulgaria can better meet the needs of this marginalised group. To ensure sustainable progress, these efforts must be underpinned by inclusive reforms, strong legal frameworks, and community-driven initiatives.



## CHAPTER 3: RESILIENCE AND EXPECTATIONS OF CDWD AND CDWD WOMEN

Despite systemic marginalisation, violence, and exclusion, CDWD (Caste, Disability, and Widely Discriminated) women and girls have demonstrated remarkable resilience and courage. They have organised themselves at various levels, advocated for their rights, and created pathways for empowerment. This chapter explores themes of courage and resilience among CDWD individuals, especially women and girls, documenting their stories and mechanisms used to resist oppression, protect families and communities, and fight for social justice. Furthermore, it highlights their responses to existing CDWD and gender justice mechanisms and their expectations for future reforms.

In recent years, progress has been made in raising awareness and fostering self-organisation around women and girls' empowerment in Bulgaria, led primarily by NGOs. Feminist organisations have started incorporating Romani women and girls into their frameworks, addressing the intersectionality of gender and marginalisation.

### EKATERINA KARAVELOVA FOUNDATION

Recognising the lack of sociological research on women's issues in Bulgaria, the Ekaterina Karavelova Foundation conducted a study to examine normalised inequalities and intersectional discrimination faced by women across the country, including Romani women. The study highlights challenges to gender equality in politics and connects these challenges to women's rights and participation in decision-making. It concludes that achieving gender equality in Bulgaria requires concerted efforts by institutions and political parties, as well as active participation from civil society (Karavelova Foundation, 2022).

### BULGARIAN FUND FOR WOMEN

The Bulgarian Fund for Women supports women's self-organisation and resilience, with a primary focus on marginalised groups, including Romani girls and women. They actively raise awareness about gender-based violence and advocate for the rights of marginalised communities.



## ROMA ORGANIZATIONS AND EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES

Many Roma organisations have shifted their focus from solely emphasising education to addressing broader issues, such as women's political representation, prevention of early marriages, and promoting women's rights. Examples include:

### AMALIPE CENTER

The Amalipe Center is the largest Roma organisation in Bulgaria, promoting inter-ethnic dialogue, tolerance, and the integration of Roma people.

#### 1. Key Initiatives:

- Empowerment of Roma women.
- Prevention of early marriages.
- Including Roma women's issues in national agendas.

#### 2. Focus Areas:

- Empowering women in rural communities through activities under the National Program "From Social Assistance to Employment."

### TRUST FOR SOCIAL ACHIEVEMENT (TSA)

TSA works to empower Roma girls by addressing challenges like teenage motherhood and societal discrimination. Through its RoMoMatter project, TSA trains Roma women to serve as facilitators, guiding girls aged 10-14 in empowerment activities. TSA creates role models and fosters informed life choices by building support networks, promoting reproductive justice, and offering scholarships for Roma women in healthcare.

Their Scholarship Program for Roma Nurses and Midwives aims to:

- Encourage Roma women to pursue medical education.
- Address healthcare challenges in impoverished Roma communities.
- Improve education outcomes and reduce early marriages.

### ARETE YOUTH FOUNDATION

The Arete Youth Foundation's National Roma Girls Camp, launched in 2020, is a three-day event designed to:

- Foster leadership and confidence among young Roma women aged 16-25
- Equip participants with skills to resist societal and peer pressures, including early marriage and school dropout.
- Build networks of mentors and future community leaders.

## MEDIA NARRATIVES AND ROLE MODELS

Although media portrayals of Roma women are often stereotypical, there are positive examples of initiatives highlighting their achievements. For instance, the “Ambassador for a Day” initiative encourages young girls, including Romani girls, to experience diplomatic roles and advocate for gender equality. One such participant, Evelina Dimitrova, a 17-year-old from Galiche, gained recognition for her essay on early child development and Roma integration, showcasing the potential of Romani youth.

Organisations such as Amalipe, TSA, and Arete Youth Foundation actively support CDWD women and girls in combating discrimination and violence.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen Capacity-Building Programs:** Enhance training initiatives for CDWD women to build leadership and resilience.

- **Foster Partnerships:** Encourage collaboration between civil society organisations, state institutions, and community groups.

- **Increase Visibility:** Promote media coverage that challenges stereotypes and highlights the achievements of CDWD women.

## EXPECTATIONS FOR LEGAL AND POLICY REFORMS

CDWD women and girls call for:

- Comprehensive anti-discrimination laws.
- Gender-sensitive policies tailored to marginalised communities.
- Enhanced access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities.
- More excellent representation in political and decision-making processes.

- **Support Legal Reforms:** Advocate for policies that address intersectional discrimination and promote justice for marginalised women.

- **Encourage Intergenerational Engagement:** Leverage the support of families and community elders to sustain resilience and social cohesion.

This chapter underscores the resilience and courage of CDWD women and girls, whose efforts contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society. Their voices and actions offer valuable lessons for addressing systemic discrimination and envisioning a future of justice and equality.

# CONCLUSIONS

Roma communities - being the largest communities discriminated on Work and Descent in Europe shall be recognised in the country as such, with particular attention provided by the government to the unique challenges faced by the communities. Hence, the Bulgarian government must take immediate action to combat systemic discrimination against Roma communities. Without effective legal protections, inclusive policies, and enforcement mechanisms, Roma remain at risk of further marginalisation.

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