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## Romani Women: The European Union's Most Stigmatized Minority

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# Romani Women: The European Union's Most Stigmatized Minority

## **Cover Page Footnote**

There are many gaps in the literature available regarding the Roma, as the non-Roma population does not take much interest into truly understanding Romani society and its subtleties, and many Romani communities do not trust non-Roma with their problems, and rightfully so. I did my best to paint an accurate picture of Romani society and the plights its women face with the literature available to me without resorting to victim-blaming, as many organisations still unfortunately do when reporting on this community. And finally, thank you to my partner, Jobel Vecino at the University of California, Berkeley, for pushing me to complete this paper on top of my schoolwork, for his patience, and for taking the time to look over my paper innumerable times.

## 1

# Romani Women: The European Union's Most Stigmatized Minority

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Roma are Europe's most discriminated and vulnerable minority, yet little is really known about them. This paper will shed light on the situation of Romani women through interviews done through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and publications released through the European Union. As the gaps between the Roma and the general population are still so big, the author cannot offer any concrete solutions, but it is hoped that this will show the shortcomings of the institutions of the European Union, and its member states in helping the Roma.

## **KEYWORDS**

discrimination, women's rights, Roma, racial inequality, gender inequality

## INTRODUCTION

At 6 million individuals, the Roma are the largest minority in the European Union (EU), with significant numbers in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom (European Commission, n.d.). Their history with Europe is a long one, with estimates dating back to the 12th century. Most academics believe the Roma come from northeast India; a Hungarian theology student in the 17th century noted linguistic similarities between Indians speaking Malabar and Roma speaking Romanes (Czech Radio, 2000), and genetic testing done in recent years has proven their roots. Because Romanes is not a written language, and Roma have a hard time trusting outsiders due to historic xenophobia, there are no proven reasons as to why the Roma left. However, there are two possible reasons. The Roma were at the bottom of the Indian caste system, so they were mistreated by society. It is believed that they fled the country to escape this mistreatment. Researchers also believe that the Roma started traveling west “to fight in wars in what is today Punjab between 1001 and 1026 on the promise of a promotion in caste status” (Nelson, 2012).

As they arrived in Europe, they were greeted with open arms and were offered shelter. Travelers in the 14th century were viewed as penitents, and the Roma played on this myth to garner sympathy. Two stories that were thrown around were that the Roma were wandering to pay for the sins of their non-believing forefathers, or that the Roma were non-believers themselves. The Roma men offered their services as laborers and craftsmen, and the women helped with children and cooking (Czech Radio, 2000). They were treated with respect, except in Wallachia and Moldavia in modern-day Romania, where they were kept as slaves (Silverman, 1995).

As time went on, attitudes changed dramatically. Roma began to arrive in greater numbers and local populations felt threatened. Despite the initial desire to help the local populations, the Roma were always on the outskirts of society and had done little to assimilate. In the Balkans, people became suspicious of the Roma, thinking they were spies for the Turks. The combination of these elements eventually led to what can be called the first Romani genocide (Czech Radio, 2000).

For several hundred years, the Roma were subject to heinous treatment. “Bounties were paid for their capture, dead or alive, and repressive measures included confiscation of property and children, forced labor, prison sentences, whipping, branding, and other forms of physical mutilation.” Several countries also forced them to assimilate with the local populations, banning their ways of dress, language, and even taking away their children (Silverman, 1995). For example, Sweden continued the practice well into the 1970s of taking away Romani children because the government believed their parents were unfit to take care of them (Swedish Ministry of Culture, 2015). The Roma were also targeted during Hitler’s rise to power, branded as “racially inferior,” and were subject to the same fate as the Jews. It was only until 1979 that their genocide was recognized as being racially motivated, rather than being a legitimate response to punish criminals, by the Federal Republic of Germany (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.).

Discrimination continues today under multiple forms. This paper will focus specifically on the plight of Romani women, who face triple discrimination: for being women, for being minorities, and for being part of a socially excluded group. To understand why Romani women are treated the way they are, this paper will first begin with an explanation

of the Romani family structure and the perceptions of the Romani community from the eyes of Europeans. Once that is established, discrimination against Romani women from within and outside their communities will be explained. Finally, a brief overview of the European Union and its member states' projects (or lack thereof) to combat discrimination against the Roma will be presented.

## **I. ROMANI FAMILY STRUCTURE**

To truly understand the hardships faced by Romani women, it is imperative to understand how the Romani family is structured and how non-Romani view them. It must be noted that finding objective, academic explanations of the Romani family structure was difficult, so I took the common themes from multiple explanations. In addition, finding explanations that were applied to Romani community across Europe was difficult as well, so when I thought it appropriate, I applied observations from individual communities to the whole. Unfortunately, this means that the final image is incomplete or skewed.

### ***a. Family Structure as seen by the Romani***

The general consensus is that Romani families and communities are traditionally patriarchal<sup>1</sup>. In their book *Integrating Minorities: Traditional Communities and Modernization*, Agnieszka Barszczewska and Lehel Peti describe the typical Romani family. Romani society is typically collective, and “the traditional Romani family unit [...] is led by one dominant male figure [...] looked upon as the leader” (2011, p. 162). When children marry, they initially live with the son’s family until “they move into a place of their own” (p. 163). The Czech Republic’s public radio broadcaster Czech Radio website *Roma in the Czech Republic* states that the more children a family has, especially boys, the better off they will be as they will be able to work and bring in money. However, Barszczewska and Peti state that in practical life, women hold the power as they’re the ones who raise the children and are “responsible to determine how the household functions and to manage finances” (p. 163).

Romane boys and girls are also treated differently. The understanding that “men are the family leaders [...] and women are the housekeepers” is instilled in children as soon as possible (Tran, 2011). From a young age, girls help their mothers with the maintenance of the household and younger family members so they can learn the skills necessary to become a good wife and mother and “through it all not to forget to smile” (Xhemalaji, 2000). Part of the reason for this proximity to their family is so that they can learn “obedience to their superiors”, but also so their families can monitor their behavior. Romani activist Sabrina Xhemalaji (2000) writes in an article for the European Roma Rights Centre that girls cannot go out without a chaperone, Outings to the swimming pool and movies are forbidden for fear of being influenced by gádje (non-Romani), as is sex before marriage. On the other hand, boys have much more free time than girls, and only start joining their fathers and uncles at work when they’re able to handle a minimum of the physical labor. “They are taught to be self-confident” and “their freedom is also expressed by the common acceptance that they can go out as much as they want and even have sexual experience with

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the sources used describe the Romani family structure and community as patriarchal (meaning that men hold them power), including, but not limited to, the European Parliament, Czech Radio, Slovo 21 (an NGO dedicated to helping Roma causes in the Czech Republic), and the European Center for Roma Rights.

non-Romani females before marriage” (Tran, 2011). As long as the young men settle down with a Romani wife and keep their culture’s values, going out is not looked down upon.

Virginity, at least for girls, is still highly prized in Romani communities. According to Xhemalaji (2000), it is still common in some communities to display blood-stained sheets (signifying the tearing of the hymen, a usual marker of virginity) after a couple’s first married night together. If a couple fails to produce blood-stained sheets, the girl is “sent back to her family the same night” and “[t]he reputation of the family is ruined and the girl is stigmatised.” For couples who have had sex prior to being married, their families will often try to arrange a union so that the girl and her family will not be stigmatized by the community. If a Romano boy marries a gadjja, he will not be stigmatized by his community, provided his wife “blends into [Romani] traditions [and] submits to [Romani] laws”, whereas if a Romani girl marries a gadjje, “she might be held in great contempt, and her husband would not be able to become part of the group” (Monger, 2004).

### ***b. The Romani community as seen by Europeans***

As seen throughout history, Europeans have a negative perception of the Roma. Polls from YouGov and the Pew Research Center show that no less than 41% of people of nine EU member states<sup>2</sup> have negative perceptions towards the Roma.

Negative attitudes against the Roma are prevalent for two reasons. The first reason is a perpetuation of negative stereotypes against the Roma, as well as blaming them for their situation. The second is government action against the Roma, which can encourage people to express their hatred towards this marginalized group. Negative stereotypes are important in understanding discrimination against the Roma. When I studied abroad in Paris in 2016, our orientation coordinators warned us against taking certain metro lines too late at night, particularly if we were women, as Romani children would attempt to steal our belongings and would not hesitate to use violence. When asked why Europeans do not like the Roma, commenters on Quora and Reddit cited the Roma’s unwillingness to live in a clean environment, their lack of education (which translates to a dependence on the state, as they lack the education to get a well-paying job), and their penchant for crime. These all contribute to “othering” the Roma, portraying them as savage, uneducated criminals, thus making them easy scapegoats for everything ranging from jokes to political scapegoating.

I cited negative stereotyping and victim-blaming first, as I believe that they contribute to and influence racist government policies. Racial discrimination is illegal in Europe, but that does not prevent the government from discriminating against the Roma. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) reports that one in 10 Romani children in 11 EU member states<sup>3</sup> were found to be enrolled in special education classes (FRA, 2014), even if there was no apparent disability because of the belief that the Romani children are less intelligent than their non-Romani counterparts. Roma of working age are discriminated against when looking for work, as people distrust them. The director of an employment office in Prague told the European Center for Roma Rights (ECRR) that “the Romani culture and their lifestyle [...] do not fit with the discipline of

<sup>2</sup> The United Kingdom, France, Italy, Greece, Germany, Poland, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, with the United Kingdom, France, and Germany overlapping in the two polls.

<sup>3</sup> Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

work. Roma do not have the motivation to work; they are unreliable, lazy and prefer to live on social assistance than earn a living” (Hyde, 2006).

## II. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ROMANI WOMEN

Discrimination against Romani women exists on two levels: first, within their own communities, and second, by the states they reside in, despite the laws that allegedly help them.

### *a. Discrimination against Romani women within their communities*

Xhemalaji (2000) wrote a self-described “provocative” article for the European Roma Rights Centre about the need for the push for women’s rights within Roma communities, and she does not hold back in her criticism of sexism within them. She even goes as far as to say that “the lifestyle [of Romani women] is comparable to what it was five hundred years ago. The task of the Romani woman is to take care of the children, to maintain the household, and to hold together the extended family.” She goes on to argue that the fact that women oversee the household places an undue burden on the women, and creates a work imbalance between the men and the women: while men’s work is finished once they get home, women have full-time responsibilities to manage their household and look after their children.

Romani children often drop out of school at an early age; for girls, this is around puberty as their “parents become afraid to send them to school because they fear that they will learn ‘bad things’” particularly regarding sex, such as sex education becoming influenced by non-Romani music or fashion, which they view as against their more sexually conservative values (Xhemalaji, 2000). EU-wide statistics are hard to come by, but Rebecca Ratcliffe (2012) in *The Guardian* cites that the average age Romani girls leave school is 10, and a survey done by the FRA with 11 member states<sup>4</sup> found that between 46% and 71% of Romani girls left school between the age of 16. Reasons given for leaving school include marriage or pregnancy (15% of respondents in Poland), believing themselves to be sufficiently educated (between 13% and 30% in all countries), and a need to work (between 12% and 40% in all countries). Being uneducated can negatively affect women; if they want to support themselves after leaving an abusive situation or want to help their families, they have no qualifications to get a job.

Statistics on domestic violence within the Romani community are hard to come by, and there is no substantial evidence to prove that domestic violence is higher within these communities than in the larger community. Even so, addressing the issue of domestic violence requires more cultural sensitivity than when addressing it within the larger population. It is a general fact that poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion increase the risk of violence against women. The Roma are particularly hit by this: 90% of Roma live below their country’s poverty level, one in three are unemployed<sup>5</sup>, and they are on the outskirts of society. Therefore, in this case, simply educating this community about domestic violence is not enough. As in non-Romani society, domestic violence is largely seen as a family issue, though the Romani are particularly vulnerable, since it is still a patriarchal

4 Bulgaria, Spain, Italy, Slovakia, Portugal, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Greece, Romania, France, and Poland.

5 Both statistics from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014.

society. Because of this, women may feel unsafe reporting their abuse, as they feel like “it is something to be ‘endured’”, or they fear that their husbands will find them and beat them worse for leaving. In addition, because of their economic situation, many “Roma women “are less likely to be able to access legal [...] redress, or [...] initiate criminal proceedings against [the] perpetrator [of the abuse], as some procedures cost money,” such as medical certificates and criminal procedures for “‘lesser’ crimes” of bodily harm” (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2015).

### ***b. Discrimination against Romani women by the state***

A fact that is often covered up by governments is the forced sterilization of Romani women, who were viewed as “undesirables” (McLaughlin, 2005). This happened in many European states as late as 2009 (European Association for the Defense of Human Rights [AEDH], 2015). No precise numbers exist for how many Roma were sterilized under government programs, as countries either did not collect racial data or, in countries that opened the doors to compensation, not everyone who was sterilized went through the process. However, several studies and interviews have been done with women who underwent sterilization procedures. For example, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, women signed papers without fully understanding what they were doing. This could be for several reasons: many doctors convinced women to sign the sterilization documents when they were about to give birth, thus in pain and not fully aware of what they were doing (AEDH, 2015), others were told false information, such as that procedure was temporary (van der Zee, 2015) or it was for their own health, after receiving medically unnecessary cesarean sections (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2003).

This is only one aspect of healthcare discrimination. A 2003 European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC, now the FRA) report states that General practitioners (GPs) across the EU refuse to accept Romani patients, even when refusing patients based on their ethnicity is prohibited. In addition, GPs interviewed by the EUMC for the report may assume that a patient is unable to pay or put an additional burden on the doctor, hence the refusal. It also states that Roma are generally more prone to illnesses than their native counterparts due to their lifestyle. One aspect particular to women, stated in both the EUMC and the Center for Reproductive Rights reports, is segregation in maternity wards. “Romani women are placed in separate rooms from white women and are often prohibited from using the same toilets and dining facilities as their white counterparts” (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2003, p. 15). When questioned about this, health care workers claim that they believe “Romani women would be more comfortable sharing rooms with each other”. When patients challenge them, the nurses tell the patients that they are powerless to make decisions to change the rules (EUMC, 2003, p. 43). During an investigation, the Roma Rights Centre in Slovakia found that one hospital had five delivery rooms, two of them reserved for Roma women. When both rooms were occupied, Romani women were sent in the hallway, even if one of the non-reserved rooms was empty. “Presumably, treatment in the hallway is neither sanitary, private, nor properly equipped” (EUMC, 2003, p. 43).

Discrimination in education is rampant as well. As stated in the previous section, Roma children often drop out of education earlier than their non-Romani counterparts, and placing the blame solely on Romani culture is a cop-out. Romani children in these

countries are “placed into schools for pupils with ‘mild mental disabilities’” (Amnesty International, 2015, p. 1) or attend mixed schools “but are placed in separate classrooms” (Humanium, 2016). A European Commission report from 2015 found that between 26% (Romania) and 58% (Slovakia) of children in Slovakia, Hungary, Greece, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Romania are placed in segregated classrooms (p. 3). Romani children in mixed schools also face bullying, which can range from name-calling to physical violence.

Romani girls in particular face double discrimination regarding their education: first because they’re Roma, and second because they’re girls. Their education is already of inferior quality than their non-Romani counterparts (segregation, inferior instruction, inferior infrastructure), and they’re less likely than their male counterparts to pursue higher education or get a job (65% of Romani women in 11 EU countries are not in employment, training, or education, according to a 2015 FRA survey, p. 21). If there ever comes a time when they need to support themselves economically, they do not have the necessary skills or qualifications to do so. This does not leave the door open to many possibilities, and they resort to collecting bottles, begging, or prostitution (Ratcliffe, 2012).

### **III. EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES BY THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS MEMBER STATES**

The European Union recognizes that there is still much to be done regarding the inclusion of Roma communities, and stresses that it is the joint responsibility of the EU and its member states to address this issue. The EU provides funding through the European Structural and Investment Funds to member states who propose projects to integrate the Romani community. However, there is no program directed by the EU itself, or any of its institutions. In 2005, the European Parliament voted on a resolution to ensure equal treatment and equal opportunities for Roma women, but unfortunately Parliament resolutions are not binding. The closest project would be the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, though this is just a project sponsored by the European Commission, and it is up to each member state to effectively improve Roma integration. There is no legislation to combat discrimination against the Romani, and while the European Court of Human Rights has ruled in favor of Roma individuals, the situation for them is still dire, as the Court does not check up on member states to assure that rulings are respected.

It is to be noted that the Framework does not exclusively apply to Romani women, but rather the community as a whole. This is a shortcoming that nearly all pro-Romani organizations and projects are faced with, and there is also the issue that women’s rights within the Roma community still faces contention. There is also the fear “that speaking out about violations of women’s rights within the Roma community, such as gender-based violence, or trafficking in women, will deepen anti-Romani prejudice by others” (Perixé, 2007, p. 1). However, the Framework does mention that states should be aware of gender when framing their policy ideas, and six countries specifically mention Romani women’s empowerment (Croatia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Sweden). The policy areas where states are required to focus on are health, education, employment and housing. Gender is most mentioned in health, as it is the policy area where gender-specific issues are most easily identifiable (for example, reproductive health is mostly a women’s issue). Gender is also mentioned in education and health, and no state has any plan to reduce the gender gap in housing. Some strategies states are working on “include support[ing] economic indepen-

dence of Roma women through education on gender equality in collaboration with NGOs active in the field of gender equality” in Slovakia (p. 39), implementing “educational activities with the provision of child care services so that Roma women can take part in these activities” in the Czech Republic (p. 43), and employing “nurses of Roma origin who could significantly more easily convince the Roma women to regular medical check-ups’ to increase the frequency of the Roma women’s doctor appointments” in Poland (p. 44) (European Parliament, 2013).

In 2014, the European Commission published a press release documenting the results, three years after the start of the project. There is no information about the progress made for women, though important strides have been made, and assumptions can be made about the progress. In Finland, pre-school enrollment rates for Romani children went from 2% to 60%. This indicates that more girls are receiving an education. In Berlin, Germany, there is a project to help Romani families get into secure housing, as well as facilitate friendly relations between the Roma and their neighbors. As Romani women are the primary caretakers of children, having good relations with their neighbors is vital to the inclusion of Romani children in larger society.

Discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity is still an issue however, and the press report urges member states to “enforce the legislation on the ground” (European Commission 2014), particularly in the workforce. As Romano men are still the primary breadwinners of the household, this does not affect Romani women as much, but is still an important factor to consider, especially if Romani women ever enter the workforce en masse. As stated previously, domestic violence is more prevalent in households marred by poverty and job insecurity, so if Romano men are securely employed, their wives and children may experience less violence.

## **CONCLUSION**

Roma women still face many barriers today when it comes to being at a sport in society comparable to their non-Romani counterparts. The Romani family structure is highly patriarchal, but it must be stated that there are women who feel equal in status to their husband. According to Voicu and Popescu, 78% of Romani women in the Czech Republic report making joint decisions with their husbands, or making decisions some or a lot of the time. They also report that some communities give women more power such as handling finances because “women are more sensible, they stay at home and they spend money more wisely, while men would spend it on drinks and other temptations”. However, there are two sides to every story, and just because one portion of the population may feel comfortable with their treatment by family and outsiders does not mean that measures cannot be taken to help those who do not. Romani women face discrimination on everything ranging from health to education, to economic security to social security (such as going to the police to seek help in a physically violent relationship). Even if there are organizations to help empower Romani women from within their communities, it is not enough. For Roma who are citizens of the EU they are, by law, on equal footing with their non-Romani counterparts and should have equal access to resources such as education or health care. For Roma who are refugees (for example from non-EU Balkan states such as Serbia or Macedonia), their legal status is precarious and limits their rights to the same resources as non-Romani. The risk is elevated for those who are stateless. The FRA

estimates that “tens of thousands of Roma live in Europe without a nationality. Lacking birth certificates, identity cards, passports and other documents, they are often denied basic rights such as education, health care, social assistance and the right to vote” (Hammarberg, 2009).

Unfortunately, not much has been done at the state or EU level. The European Parliament has passed several resolutions to assert the status of Roma as a community who deserves the same rights and freedoms as other European citizens, but unfortunately Parliament resolutions are not binding. It can also be argued that the EU is simply making a show out of saying that the Roma ought to be treated on the same level as ethnic Europeans. In July 2010, when French police shot and killed a Romano man, then-president Nicholas Sarkozy made a declaration to dismantle the camps the Roma were living in and deport those who were found to be living illegally in France. A press report from the Elysée Palace stated that the camps were “sources of illegal trafficking, of profoundly shocking living standards, of exploitation of children for begging, of prostitution and crime”. This is not the first time this has happened. The previous year, France sent 10,000 Roma of Bulgarian and Romanian citizenship back to their home countries (Willsher, 2010). France justified its deportations “on the grounds that [Romani] settlements were illegal and presented a security risk” (Severance, 2010).

France’s deportations created an uproar in the EU, yet none of its institutions legally pursued France. EU Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding threatened that the Commission would take legal action when leaked documents from the Interior Minister to French police departments gave the order to evacuate camps, and compared the evacuations to ones made by Germany during World War Two. France and Germany condemned the comparison, and she issued an apology. After this, there was no more talk about the EU pursuing action against France, although the European Commission called on member states to develop policies for Roma inclusion, which resulted in the Framework for National Roma Inclusion. However, as discussed in the paper, this is simply not enough to ensure that the Roma get on equal ground with non-Romanis. It is less than three years to the end of the project, and the situation is still desolate.

It would be false to say that the situation will be changed in the upcoming years. The government initiatives in the country reports in the Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies unintentionally place the blame on the Roma for the way that they live, particularly when it comes to housing and health, as Roma often live in substandard housing, which in turn can lead to health problems.

There is still so much to be done to elevate the status of Roma, particularly Romani women, that it is simply not possible to provide a comprehensive list of suggestions. Here is what can be said though: promises that may eventually become law are simply not enough, as it is easy to ignore the law when you dehumanize a group of people. If the EU truly cares about the rights of the Roma, they need to become tougher when member states disregard the rights of its citizens. Governments and NGOs should not simply focus on alleviating the plight of the Roma, but also increase understanding of them in the non-Romani population. The media also needs to report the plight of this vulnerable population: a lot of hatred stems from ignorance, and while there are people who will not budge

on their positions, sometimes simply being educated on a topic can change matters.

### AUTHOR'S NOTES

There are many gaps in the literature available regarding the Roma, as the non-Roma population does not take much interest into truly understanding Romani society and its subtleties, and many Romani communities do not trust non-Roma with their problems, and rightfully so. I did my best to paint an accurate picture of Romani society and the plights its women face with the literature available to me without resorting to victim-blaming, as many organisations still unfortunately do when reporting on this community. And finally, thank you to my partner, Jobel Vecino at the University of California, Berkeley, for pushing me to complete this paper on top of my schoolwork, for his patience, and for taking the time to look over my paper innumerable times.

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