

Roma Women Suffer Double Discrimination in Bulgaria

Author: [Boryana Dzhambazova](#)

Forced into a subordinate role in their own community, Roma women also have to put up with blatant ethnic discrimination from Bulgarians.

“The girl has to be a virgin – it’s a must,” said 40-year-old Gyula Dimitrova, speaking with conviction in her eyes.

She takes her community’s marital requirement as a given and can’t hide a smile recalling her wedding, and especially the “blaga rakia” ritual, at which the guests drank a pinkish-red liquor to symbolise the bride’s virginity.

“People don’t think well of girls who fail to keep their honour,” Roza Noteva, 22, agrees. She represents a younger generation, but she believes and obeys communal traditions just as firmly as Gyula.

At her wedding, she and her husband were presented with a house. His parents wanted the munificent gift to demonstrate their pleasure about the fact that she had joined their family as a virgin.

“No good man would take a bride who is not a virgin,” Gyula continues, explaining that such women are doomed to lead lonely, marginalised lives. Of course, virginity is more optional for the grooms.

Although Bulgaria’s 24 Roma communities differ in religion and rituals, they unite in upholding highly conservative attitudes towards women.

Well into the 21st century, the Roma remain one of the most patriarchal societies in Europe, with men having far more rights than women.

The sexual discrimination Roma women have to put up with is even harder to endure when combined with the ethnic discrimination that is common in many post-socialist countries.

For Roma women in Bulgaria, subordinate status in the family and the community, a low standard of living and education, a weak position in the labour market and the negative attitudes of ethnic Bulgarians, can combine to make life grim.

Statistics show Roma women without a secondary education are usually doomed to unemployment – which means the majority of them, as United Nations research from 2003 showed only 16 per cent of Roma people in Bulgaria had completed secondary or higher education.

There are some signs of change, however. Along with seven other countries, Bulgaria proclaimed this year the start a “Decade of Roma Inclusion”.

As part its effort to modernise and introduce EU-related reforms, the country has made legislative and other changes aiming to better integrate this minority, which makes up almost a tenth of Bulgaria’s population.

A number of non-governmental organisations are working on key projects to reduce the social disparity between the communities.

The Creating Effective Grassroots Alternative, CEGA, foundation, for example, is working to increase Roma women's participation in public life.

But in practice, any real improvement in their lives still seems a distant prospect.

According to the Open Society Foundation, most Roma girls who got to school at all leave well before graduation, in order to take care of younger brothers and sisters, marry, or give birth.

Although the average marriage age has been rising over the last 15 years among Roma, some maintain the tradition of marrying off their daughters at 12 or 13.

Roza Noteva is one of the minority who didn't drop out of education. But she attended a school in which Roma were segregated from other pupils, and she believes several potential employers rejected her job applications for this reason.

She graduated in needlework but has been forced to take work as a part-time cleaner.

Her mother-in-law, Silvia Stefanova, nods sadly and adds that prejudice in society towards Roma remains stronger than good will. "When we travel on the bus everybody clutches their purses, as they think all gypsies are thieves," she said. "We are treated as black sheep no matter how much we want to earn our living honestly by working hard."

Rumian Sechkov, executive manager of CEGA, says Roma women in Bulgaria lag about a generation behind the rest of society. "They now enjoy about the same level of emancipation as Bulgarian women did during the Second World War," he said.

If so, women like Roza Noteva and Gyula Dimitrova have a 60-year wait ahead of them before they can even begin to enjoy the same rights as contemporary Bulgarians.

Boryana Dzhambazova is a BCR contributor.

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable Training

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/roma-women-suffer-double-discrimination>