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1. Introduction

The present document corresponds to the national report on Bulgaria, part of Deliverable D2.2 'National and summary reports' of the project Prevent And combaT domestIc violEnce against Roma women with the acronym PATTERN and project number 881731 that started on June 1st 2020, for a duration of 24 months.

PATTERN addresses the call priority 'REC-RDAP-GBV-AG-2019 – Call for proposal to prevent and combat all forms of violence against children, young people and women'. The overall objective of the project is to contribute to the prevention and combatting of domestic violence against Roma women in Greece, Bulgaria, Portugal, Spain, and Romania.

In order to reach its overall objective, the project has set the following more specific objectives:

- Increasing access to knowledge/data on the phenomenon of domestic violence against Roma women.
- Developing Domestic Violence Protocols for Roma Women that enable professionals to respond to domestic violence comprehensively.
- Enhancing the capacities of at least 350 Roma intercultural mediators and professionals in community centres/other local community services on domestic violence against Roma women.
- Enhancing the capacities of at least 100-150 Roma women on how to recognize and report domestic violence and act as leaders of change in their communities.
- Raising awareness in Roma communities to building healthy & egalitarian relationships.

This deliverable D2.2 forms part of PATTERN WP2 "Research on domestic violence in Roma communities with the involvement of Roma women" which has the objective of increasing access to knowledge/data on the phenomenon of domestic violence against Roma women.

This report has the following structure: in section 2, the national framework (in brief) on domestic violence in the Roma communities is set; in section 3, the methodology adopted in the fieldwork is detailed; section 4 is devoted to the characterisation of the participants in the interviews; section 5 presents the main findings of the interviews; finally section 6 summarises the key conclusions of the research on domestic violence against Roma women in Bulgaria.

2. National framework (in brief) on domestic violence in the Roma communities

2.1 Law and policy

Domestic violence continues to be a topic covered by a number of stereotypes, taboos and prejudices, both in the macro society and in the Roma community. Until recently, the issue of domestic violence has not even been recognised as a problem. One of the reasons is partly rooted in our Communist past when it was believed that equality between men and women had been already achieved. Partly, the underestimation of the problem has been justified due to deeply rooted patriarchal stereotypes in Bulgarian society and Balkan region in general.¹

For more than 12 years Bulgarian civil society has been striving and advocating for a legislation set that would regulate equality between men and women and would put under punishment violation of women's rights and domestic violence in particular. Finally, in 2016 after a number of draft laws have been proposed and discussed, the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men was adopted. It regulates the institutional mechanism for equality of women and men, but does not contain provisions of substantive nature to regulate real equality through the introduction of mandatory rules of conduct, sanctions for their violation and non-compliance, as well as the procedure for exercising control and imposing sanctions. The law does not offer incentives in critical areas of identified inequality.²

During the last two years, the issue of domestic violence fell in the trap of right-wing populism, false news and pseudo-traditional values. In 2018, Bulgarian government succumbed to the populist pressure from its coalition partners and other political parties, different religious denominations, fake news³ and protesters supported by ultra-nationalist groups and conservative NGOs and pulled down the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.⁴ The Bulgarian Constitution Court further decided that the Convention is "unconstitutional" due to the definition of "gender".⁵

¹ Gender Alternatives Foundation. *Izsledvane na prilozhenieto na Zakona za zashtita ot domashnoto nasilie* (Study on the implementation of the Law for protection from domestic violence). April 2017, available at http://genderalternatives.org/images/mmm/Izsledvane_na_prilizenieto_na_ZZDN.pdf, p. 8

² Women's Rights and Right Populism, FES, 2017, p.5, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sofia/13827.pdf>

³ Article „How the Bulgarian Society fell into the "gender" trap", Petar Cholakov, DW, <https://bit.ly/2vC8o2p>; Article "The Word Gender comes from Dzendem" (a citation by Metropolitan Gavrail, implying that both words have the same Indo-European roots, meaning "hell"), <https://frognews.bg/obshtestvo/naroden-qlas/mitropolit-gavrail-dumata-djendaridva-djendem.html>

⁴ For example, Parents United for Children Association, <https://www.facebook.com/NationalGroupOfParentsUnitedForChildren/> and here: <https://bit.ly/2GxrN6L>

⁵ Bulgarian Constitution Court, Decision no 13/ 27 July 2018, available at <http://constcourt.bg/bg/Acts/GetHtmlContent/f278a156-9d25-412d-a064-6ffd6f997310>

To compensate this in 2019 the Parliament adopted legislative amendments in the penal Code to improve the protection of women from violence. Domestic violence has been recognised as a qualifying circumstance for murder, suicidal ideation, bodily harm, kidnapping, unlawful deprivation of liberty, coercion, threat to commit a crime. According to the introduced definition, it is defined as the systematic exercise of physical, sexual or mental violence, economic dependence, forced restriction of privacy, personal freedom and personal rights and is carried out against an ascendant, descendant, spouse or ex-spouse, a person from who has a child, a person with whom he or she is or has been in de facto cohabitation, or a person with whom he or she lives or has lived in the same household. The changes mark the criminalisation and definition of stalking and represent a step forward in the general punishment of all moderate bodily injuries between relatives and spouses, but, in retreat from the original intentions, bodily injuries in a state of severe irritation caused by the victim remain crimes of a private nature. New provisions on forced marriages are introduced. It abolishes the incentive norm which provides full exemption from punishment for an adult who, after cohabiting with a female person under the age of 16, had married her.

From a procedural point of view, the amendments provide for informing the victim of special protection needs if the perpetrator is released or escapes from the place where he is detained or from prison. Violation of protection orders, criminalised at present, acquires qualified staff in case of repeated violation.⁶

In addition, the field of domestic violence continues to be “terra incognita” for Roma women in terms of legislation. It still lacks sensitivities regarding the specifics of the issue in the Roma community. The same refer to Roma integration policies.

The National Roma Integration Strategy 2012-2020 recognises the structural inequalities that Roma women face in terms of patriarchal norms, gender inequality and discrimination. It recognises international legal human rights standards and Bulgaria’s responsibilities under these documents. However, at municipal levels, these priorities remain unaddressed. So do they in terms of real actions both at local and national level. As a result, Roma (women) continue to be at the periphery of social and institutional interest.⁷

⁶ Center for Study of Democracy. *Violence against Women: key findings and strategies for overcoming the non-reported cases of violence and for better implementation of the orders for protection*, 2019, p.9, available at <https://csd.bg/bg/publications/publication/nasilie-sreshchu-zheni-kljuchovi-konstatacii-i-strategii-za-spravjane-s-nedokladvani-sluchai-na-nasilie/>

⁷ Center Amalipe. *Civil Society Monitoring Report on Implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategy in Bulgaria. Identifying blind spots in Roma integration policy*. 2019, p.24-26, available at <https://amalipe.bg/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RCM-Y3-C1-Bulgaria-for-publ.pdf>

During recent years, right-wing parties are getting higher in political hierarchy. They are part of the governmental coalition in the present government. This reflects not only gender policies but Roma policies as well. The anti-Roma concept proposed by the Deputy Prime Minister Karakachanov in February 2019 is an indicative example in this direction. It is not just that it has no sensitivity regarding domestic violence but it highly violates Roma women rights proposing targeted “voluntary birth control for women from marginalised groups including supply of contraceptives and termination of pregnancy funded by the state budget”.⁸

At present the process for preparation of the new Roma Integration Strategy 2021-2030 has started. However, it does not point any progress. The only reference to gender equality and situation of Roma men and women is a “copy-paste” statement from Strategy 2011-2020 about structural inequalities and just mentioning of “prevention of domestic violence” at only one place, among other things such as “domestic crime and anti-social behavior”.⁹

2.2 Statistics and research results

Regarding Roma women, Bulgarian government has been often reluctant to gather data based on ethnicity. In addition, there are no official statistics on the number of domestic violence victims, no imposed State standards for services for victims of domestic violence, and no register on perpetrators of domestic violence. These facts continue to be unaddressed despite that women’s NGOs have advocated for years the introduction of these measures for revealing the scale of the problem with violence against women and improving social response and coordination.¹⁰

The statistics of the Ministry of Interior for 2019 show that the number of issued orders for immediate protection from domestic violence under the Protection from Domestic Violence Act (PDVA) has jumped four times compared to 2018. In 2017, these orders were 575, in 2018 - 601, and in 2019 their number increases to 2,338. However, the fourfold increase in cases of immediate protection is not equivalent to four times as many victims of domestic violence seeking help from the court. The increased number might be due to the increased focus on

⁸ Center Amalipe. *Civil Society Monitoring Report on Implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategy in Bulgaria. Identifying blind spots in Roma integration policy.* 2019, p.16-17, available at <https://amalipe.bg/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RCM-Y3-C1-Bulgaria-for-publ.pdf>. Detailed analysis see at Kolev, D., *Barrack integration: the Roma concept of Bulgarian DPM Karakachanov*, available at: <http://amalipe.com/index.php?nav=news&id=3436&lang=2>

⁹ The draft strategy can be found at <http://www.nccedi.government.bg/bg/node/351>

¹⁰ Center Amalipe. *Civil Society Monitoring Report on Implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategy in Bulgaria. Identifying blind spots in Roma integration policy.* 2019, p.25, available at <https://amalipe.bg/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RCM-Y3-C1-Bulgaria-for-publ.pdf>

domestic violence after the rejection of Istanbul convention and the fact that Court and other institutions felt obliged to register more cases as possible.¹¹ Further information on the cases of trafficking, sexual harassment and court cases of domestic violence can be found in the report of the Center for Study of Democracy.¹²

Furthermore, every third victim of murder in Bulgaria in 2019 was a woman, according to the statistics of the Ministry of Interior. In 2019, a total of 80 murders were committed, 25 of which were of women. Two-thirds of them were killed by their closest people - spouses, intimate partners or relatives. The main motive is jealousy. In 2018, 1,500 women and children fell victim to domestic violence, according to the Animus Foundation. Again for comparison - in 2017 they were 1,300.

In the last couple of months, since the introduction of the state of emergency on the hotline for victims of violence, 408 calls have been received. For comparison, in the same period of 2019 they were 351. From March to early June, 9 women were killed by their partners.¹³

At present, due to the imposed isolation, there is an increase in the cases of domestic violence. Measures to limit the spread of Covid-19 increase the risk of domestic violence. For many women and children, home can be a place where fear reigns and they have been treated cruelly. This situation is exacerbated during isolation and complete quarantine. For victims of domestic violence, it becomes even more difficult when there is a lack of support from those around them. In order to mobilise a community, it is necessary to make efforts to raise awareness of the problem.

However, still a big number of cases remain unreported. According to the Center for the Study of Democracy, 70 to 80 percent of domestic violence cases remain unreported. According to an April 2016 report by the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation, the rate was as high as 90 percent among Roma women due to fear and lack of family and institutional support.¹⁴ In August 2019, the Gender Alternatives Foundation's team implemented a needs assessment among Roma women on living conditions, with focus on domestic violence.¹⁵ This happened during the six Info Days Meetings on Human Rights with the Roma community living in the

¹¹ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. *Human Rights in Bulgaria 2019*. 2020, available at <https://www.bghelsinki.org/bg/reports/human-rights-in-bulgaria-in-2019-bg>

¹² Center for Study of Democracy. *Violence against Women: key findings and strategies for overcoming the non-reported cases of violence and for better implementation of the orders for protection*, 2019, p.9, available at <https://csd.bg/bg/publications/publication/nasilie-sreshchu-zheni-kljuchovi-konstatacii-i-strategii-za-spravjane-s-nedokladvani-sluchai-na-nasilie/>

¹³ <https://amalipe.bg/domashno-nasilie/>

¹⁴ United States Department of State. *2016 Country reports on Human Rights Practices – Bulgaria*. Available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/58ec8a64a.html>

¹⁵ Project "Knowledge for Change", funded by the Bulgarian Fund for Women

segregated Roma neighbourhood Stolipinovo in Plovdiv. A total number of 69 people participated, 51 women and 18 men. During the Info Days none of the participants came with a domestic violence issue. With time, however, a considerable number of female participants admitted having been subjected to domestic violence. As a result of the violence they faced, their socio-economic situation is extremely poor.¹⁶

2.3 Specifics of domestic violence in the Roma communities

Roma women perception of domestic violence is closely related to the gender perception in the Roma community. At the same time, it is not a unique concept but a whole range of concepts dependent on different factors, such as group affiliation, level of modernisation, and so on.

One of the most serious factors that have an effect on the change of gender perceptions is the level of modernisation and frequency of contacts with macro-society. In that sense, conceptions in different Roma groups are different because the integration level is also different. For example in the Rudari group the woman emancipation is stronger than in the other groups. In the group of more traditional and closed communities, the emancipation is very low as in the group of Kaldarashi and Burgudzhii.

In the Roma community, control over women is particularly strong because it is women who are perceived to pass on the identity, values and norms of the group to the younger generations. Gender perceptions in the Roma family are subordinated to the patriarchal understanding for the leadership of man. No matter from which group it is, the family still accepts the boy as the person who carries the family potential. It is not by accident that having a boy is very important in a Kaldarashi family. There are many cases of boy's adoptions by families that have only girls, because of the steady tradition that "the boy is taking care of the parents". In the Kaldarashi tradition the youngest boy who will take care of the parents remains in the parent's house. As pointed above this is not a conception restricted only to the Kaldarashi community. A similar belief was shared also in the interviews with Rudari women who are much more modernised; they have characteristics closer to the macro-society and have more developed processes of women's emancipation.

¹⁶ Report "A State of Impasse – Roma Women in the Periphery of Public and Political Interest (BG)", https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR/C/BGR/CO/4&Lang=En

The other reason is that in the community, the only legitimate form of power has always been only the power of men over women. As in other communities with a preserved patriarchal structure, the honour of men and the family does not depend on men's achievements in the economic, political or cultural spheres, but on women's behaviour. That is why the "good woman" is expected to be a virgin until her wedding; to marry early for a boy from her group; to give birth to a son quickly, and possibly more children; to be faithful to her husband; to maintain an exemplary household; to organise the work of daughters-in-law and daughters; to take care of the man, the children, the elderly and the sick. The woman is not expected to perform in school or strive to establish herself as a good specialist. Teachers of Roma children from traditional Roma groups or in large urban ghettos often complain that parents force the most able female students to leave school early and marry them soon after. Early marriages and dropping out of school are among the safest means of keeping young Roma in the community.

While compliance with the group's norms is rewarded with public recognition, non-compliance is severely punished. For example, if a young Roma woman decides not to marry young but to study longer, this might be accepted by her parents but met with disapproval from neighbours and relatives. If she has a high school or university degree, this can be a barrier to finding a good husband in her community. Both young men and their mothers will fear that she will not be an obedient woman, making her undesirable for a wife. If she marries a person from another ethnic group, it can lead to her falling out of the group forever.

The existing perceptions for the position and the role of the woman in different Roma groups in a large extent define the difference in socialisation between boys and girls, respectively between men and women in the family. While men have more and intensive contacts with the institutions and in general with the macro-society, they are more adaptive and open for changes even if they do not realise it. At the expense of that, women who have less contacts out of the family and community, very often want a change, but do not know what kind of a change and how to achieve it.

Furthermore, discrimination from outside society and institution also adds to the problem: if a Roma woman decides to complain to the police about her husband's systematic beatings, she risks being rejected by everyone else for her "treacherous behaviour" and so on. It will most likely be rejected by the institutions themselves with the words "This is how things happen with you". Roma men are increasingly failing to assert their role as breadwinners, as persistent poverty, unemployment and the inability to earn a stable income. Unemployed Roma men feel that they have failed as men, husbands and fathers. As a result, the authority of men within the family is eroding. Those who are strongly attached to traditional values about the role of the sexes increasingly feel that they have lost their position in society. The decline in the authority of Roma men within the family is one of the main reasons for the high levels of stress in households and the feeling of increasing domestic violence. Although traditional gender roles

are formally maintained, the authority of the man in the family seems to be increasingly questioned by women, especially in the absence of income provided by men. Among the main reasons for the growing domestic violence and conflicts between spouses are: unemployment, lack of food and money, as well as daily domestic quarrels over how to distribute and spend family income. Men feel desperate about their inability to meet traditional expectations. They resort to conflict and domestic violence as a way to re-establish their dominant position, while struggling to live up to expectations of ensuring the well-being of their families. Roma women are highly economically dependent on their husbands and their parents. The lack of own funds to have completely limits their opportunities for contacts and movement outside the neighbourhood or village. Even if a Roma woman victim of domestic violence decides to seek protection and support, she will not be able to reach another settlement.

3. Methodology

The research has been carried out from October to the beginning of December 2020 in the context of Corona virus pandemic and in the situation of hardening the anti-epidemic measures in Bulgaria. It followed the methodology agreed by the partnership and the protocol for the field research prepared taking into account the specifics of the local Roma community in Bulgaria.

Bulgaria is one of the countries with the most large Roma population. The exact number of the Roma could hardly be determined, because a large majority of them prefer to be declared as Turkish, Bulgarian or Wallachians at the population census. According to the census in 2001 370,908 people declared themselves as Roma, and according to the census in 2011 – 325,343 people, out of which 44.13% live in the villages. At the same time authoritative international and Bulgarian researchers determine the number of gypsies in Bulgaria of about 800,000 people. Nevertheless, more than 60% of the Roma hide or deny their identity out of fear of discrimination or loss of social status and occupational/professional position. Among the estimations, the highest percentage of Roma estimated is that of the European Council, according to which the Roma constitute 10.33% of Bulgarian population.¹⁷ More information about Roma community in Bulgaria, Roma groups and sub-groups can be found in the Manual of Roma History and Culture.¹⁸

Taking into account the very diverse profile of the Roma community in Bulgaria the project team has made very careful selection of interviewees in order to reflect diversity, both in geography and groups specifics. They covered the four big major Roma groups, as well as some of the groups which are smaller but are unique and mark special levels of modernization of the Roma community.

In order to provide fully comfortable, relaxed and trusty environment for the interviewed women all interviewers have also been women. They have been both, Roma and non-Roma women because different approaches apply in different groups: in some communities women feel more confident to share to people who do not belong to the same group. At some places, the interviews were done by community and educational mediators. At some places they were organised with the support of the educational mediators in the given community.

At the beginning of the process, an on-line training for all interviewers was organised by the project team. The team presented the project, its aims and results that should be achieved and the methodology of the research.

¹⁷ Krumova, Teodora and Deyan Kolev, authors. *Manual on Roma History and Culture*, 2013, 50-55

¹⁸ Krumova, Teodora and Deyan Kolev, authors. *Manual on Roma History and Culture*, 2013

All respondents have been carefully explained the project, the aim of the project and the research and how the results from the survey would be distributed. They have been assured that their anonymity is guaranteed.

Most of the interviews have been audio recorded and transcribed afterwards. However, some of the respondents refused being recorded. In these cases, the interviewers wrote down the answers.

All respondents signed informed consent and prior permission to audio record (in cases of recording). The project team ensured that the nature, purpose, results, duration, conclusions and sharing of research, have been clearly explained, so that people understood fully to what they have agreed. General Data Protection Regulations have been adhered to. The respondents were given the opportunity to receive a copy of the consent form although none of them requested to have one.

Most of the interviews were done face-to-face. However, due to the COVID-19 situation and anti-epidemic measures it was not possible and some of the interviews were done by phone, skype, zoom or messenger. In the latter cases it was made sure that the respondents were alone and have signed prior to the interview an online consent form.

In the cases, when the interviews were conducted with the support of educational mediators, they also signed confidentiality and privacy forms.

Several other issues regarding domestic violence in the Roma community have been taken in the account during the research, namely:

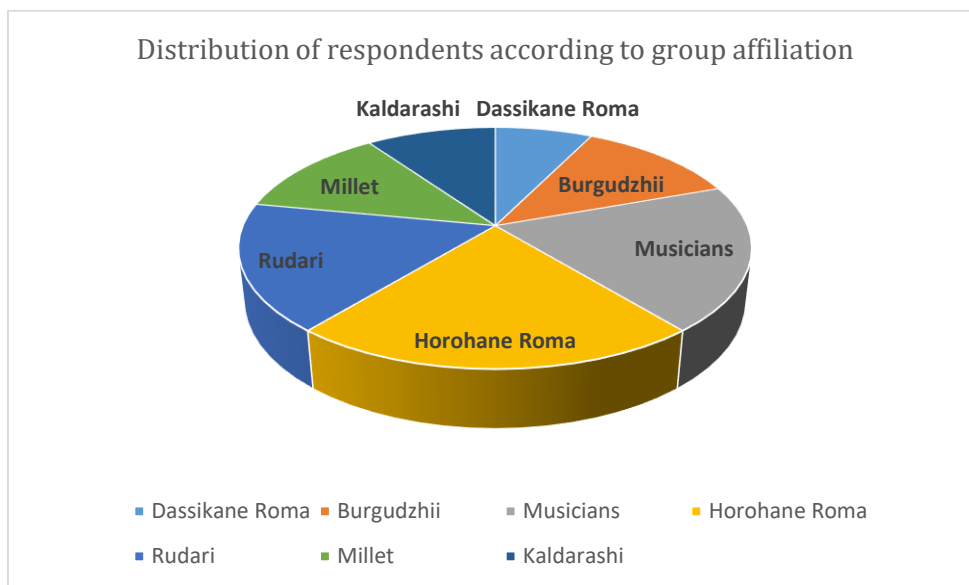
- The community matters: it is a very strong factor; the single individual and even the family are less important compared to community. Community opinion shapes behavior and attitudes. At the same time if someone rejects community opinion s/he would be very quickly punished by being excluded which (for a community person) is equal to social death. This influences perceptions and opinion, as well as follow-up action in response to domestic violence;
- Domestic violence is considered an issue that is internal family one and it is not decent to take it out of your house, even to discuss it with your family (for the women victims, for example);
- Violence is not perceived as violence if “it is deserved”. No one from the community can clearly define this. However, it is a statement that one often gets when making interviews. By assumption the woman is always guilty (unless something else is not proved);
- Physical violence has been often used as a means for raising children;
- The issue of domestic violence is a very sensitive one and the gender profile of interviewers or people, who speak about it, matters.

- We can already observe a trend of changing the attitudes of reaction towards domestic violence and building a culture and attitudes for reaction to it, but it will still take time to develop.
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- There is a high need to work in parallel with the institutions (especially policy, social workers, etc.) because they apply a lot of stereotypes about Roma women when it comes to issues of domestic violence.

4. Characterisation of the participants in the interviews

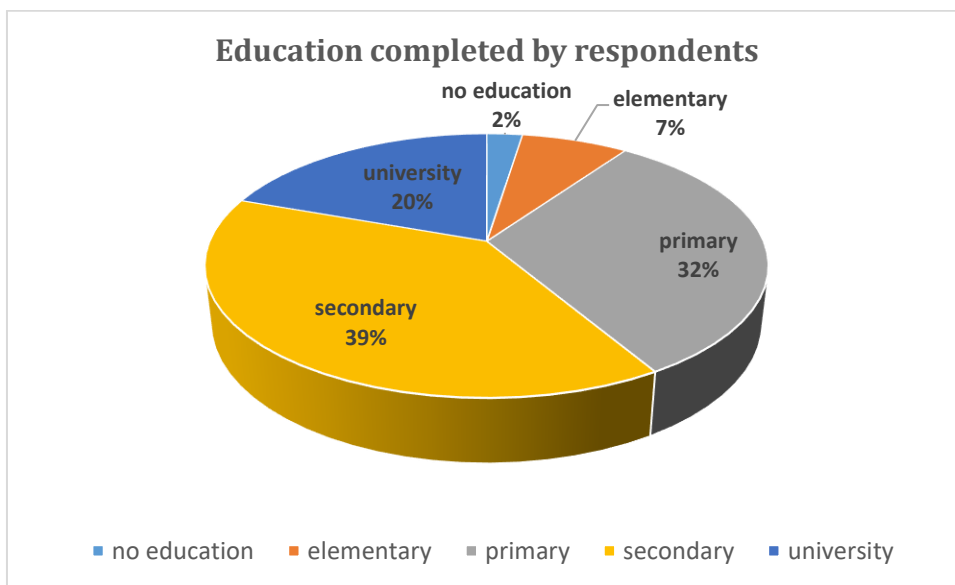
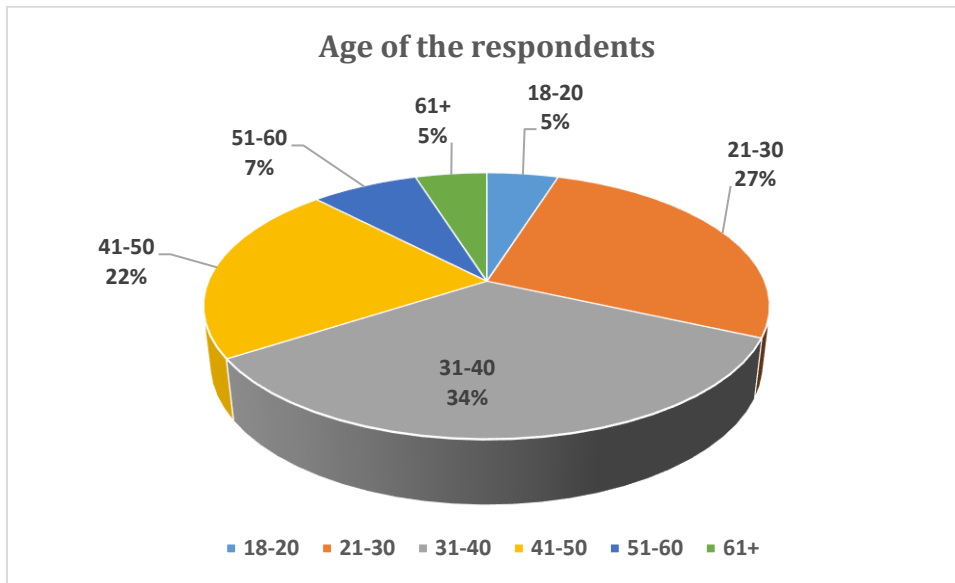
As mentioned above the profile of the participants cover the diversity of the Roma community in Bulgaria and makes a snapshot of the various profiles of these communities regarding gender perspectives and attitudes toward women. The list of respondents cover the four big major Roma groups: Horohane Roma, Dassikane Roma, Rudari, Millet and Kaldarashi, as well as some of the groups which are smaller but are unique and mark special levels of modernization of the Roma community, such as Burgudzhii and Roma-Musicians.

41 women have been included in the research from the following groups: Horohane Roma – 9 interviews; Millet – 5 interviews; Dassikane Roma – 3 interviews; Rudari – 7 interviews; Kaldarashi – 4 interviews; Burgudzhii – 5 interviews; Roma Musicians – 8 interviews. They come from different type of settlements (2 from district cities; 25 from municipal towns and 14 from villages).



Regarding the age range, one third of the respondents belong to the age group 31 – 40, followed by 27% respondents aged 21 – 30 and 22% women aged 41 – 50.

The education profile of the respondents also shows diversity: 32% of women with primary education; 39% of women with secondary education and 20% of women with university degree. When we add to this the diversity of respondents regarding age and group affiliation, we might say that we could get a sophisticated and complex profile of domestic violence and attitudes towards it in the Roma community in Bulgaria.



5. Findings

5.1 Roma women's perceptions of domestic violence

Roma women's perception of domestic violence is strongly subjected to community understanding of gender roles in the community, supposed behaviour by men and women, subordinated role of women and hierarchical relations within the community. The answers of the women in the interviews usually follow one and the same scheme: they start with the desired answers of what domestic violence is supposed to be and gradually go deeper revealing the evolution of these perceptions in the community.

At the beginning, most of the women interviewed present rather abstract image of domestic violence reflecting an image imposed by society instead of imposing their own deep understanding of the issue. In a deeper conversation and after, when the interview is ongoing they reveal different layers of these perceptions.

"According to me domestic violence can be both physical and emotional. In general we are used to perceive domestic violence as physical act, but there are also other forms.

...

I am not sure if women are responsible about domestic violence, but in some way they provoke it."
(M, 34 years old, small town, Millet Roma)

We can classify the perceptions of violence in several categories:

- "Causing physical and mental harm to the person" which emphasises the consequences of domestic violence on the victim.
- "Beatings, threats, coercion, rape" - specific, most common and recognisable acts of violence, as well as behaviour of the perpetrators.
- Satisfying the "desire for power and control" of the man, such as the destructive need that gives rise to domestic violence.
- And last but not least a category that unites all of the above categories, i.e. "causing physical and mental harm to the person", "beatings, threats, coercion, rape", "pursuit of power and control".

At the same time we can divide women into three categories: those who do not confess the existence of violence or justify it; second, women who realise how destructive and dangerous violence is but still cannot overcome their own and their community's prejudices and stereotypes; and third, women who have found the strength to openly reject all forms of violence and are ready to react no matter of the consequences.

The first category of women is very limited and just few women believe they are by nature subordinated to men and thus always guilty for any manifestation of violence (not necessary considering violence as such). This is just the way things are according to them. The reasons for violence are always underestimated and minimised just to domestic family reasons:

“The man is the head of the family, he has to say, to decide and then the woman to agree with him”; (N., 56 years old, small town, Millet Roma)

“A woman has to love her husband, to respect him in order not to be tortured (A, 27 years old, small town, Millet)”.

“Women are the weaker sex. Especially in the Roma community, women always have to be subordinated to men” (D., 68 years old, small town, Horohane Roma)

“- Do you think Domestic violence is a crime?

- No, It is a family issue” (M., 23 years old, small town, Dasikane Roma, Roma Musicians)

This type of women keeps thinking that these problems should stay only in the family and they should not share them even with their parents. The main reason is again the “victimisation of the victims”, not just in the community but in the society in general.

The second category of women’s perception of domestic violence is usually presented as someone else’s perception: « The others think it’s normal. I personally do not, I have never had such problems, but the others take it normal ».

“Men consider themselves something superior than women and they afford to say she is my property, she is my wife, I can do whatever I want with her, I can beat her, I can torture her. Maybe these things have remained from older time. Maybe this people were brought up like this.”(T., 55, village, Horohane Roma)

I have heard that in some families there are really women who abuse, seduce other men and do not take care about their families; they do not even cook, do not take care about the children” (N., 46 years old, village, Rudari)

This type of answers show the ambiguity of the understanding and the internal doubts of the respondents. They understand (more or less clearly) that domestic violence is not acceptable for society but still cannot persuade themselves and overcome the deeply rooted beliefs. They still do not perceive domestic violence as human rights violation if the spouses « love each other ». In some of the cases, women have been personally through domestic violence but they have managed to escape from this situation. Now they try to distance themselves from the personal experience trying to present it as « a friend’s experience ». Justifying partly violence, they try to find an excuse for their behaviour and for not reacting

earlier. Nevertheless, the cases when the women do not consider a slap as example of domestic violence are still not an exception.

"- I have heard that many women are victims of domestic violence. Some of these situations however stay in silence.

- Do you think there are such situations in your community?

- No." (V., 24 years old, City, Dassikane Roma)

Women, interviewed within the study usually describe domestic violence as „physical, mental, sexual violence“ which is rather a label, without being sure that all of the respondents have clear understanding what it fully means. From the further answers of the respondents however it becomes clear that in many cases domestic violence is still identified mainly with physical violence. As such it is partly justified:

„I don't think 1 or 5 slaps are violence when you beat her up – then yes.“ (G., 45 years old, small town, Dasikane Roma, Roma Musicians)

Physical violence is common, with a slap being taken for granted. If he beats her with bruises, fractures, then it is considered violence. While for a slap, it can be everyday. (Y., 25 years old, small town, Burgudjii Roma)

At the same time, the number of women who associate domestic violence not just with the physical characteristics but with the overall negative impact on the victim, including psychological impact is getting higher. This means that the sensitivity towards this issue has risen. There is significant number of answers who consider violence as *“limitation of the freedom of another person in all aspects”*.

In addition, we can see that the group affiliation and the specificity related to each group is important but more important are the educational level, type of settlement the woman lives in and her occupation. Those women who are occupied with a more “social” type of job have more emancipated perception of domestic violence. They definitely perceive it as a problem, as a crime and violation of human rights. They clearly identify it although it is not necessary linked with corresponding actions.

Even women from the most conservative Roma groups, such as Burgudjii, where women have been traditionally subordinated to men, have managed to already break the status quo. This opinion is shared by women who are aged 20 – 30: *“Violence is the final act which should not be tolerated”*. (Y., 25 years old, small town, Burgudjii Roma) Openly stating this shows that they have gained enough self-confidence to defend their opinion. They have been through it but instead of closing in a shell they have chosen to react openly. Because, as another respondent has shared, women who have enough self-confidence have enough power to react and fight

domestic violence. This marks a tremendous and very significant change in the Roma community which would bring soon to a very visible change in the trends.

Do you think domestic violence is a crime and why?

Yes, because it violates my human rights. Second, because it kills everything in me. Maybe because it closes the door for my future development, because after such violence I would close in myself. As I have experienced it.

(G. 25 years old, small town)

On the other hand, women with low education, who have married early and who had no social experience outside of the family, usually perceive violence as normal and part of *modus vivendi*. They have no basis for comparison: *“Women see violence but do not understand it. They get used to living this way, they think that's how their husbands love them. When they have no education, when they have no friends, so they remain with this thinking.”* (S., 40 years old, city, Horohane Roma) Furthermore, as it is in many conservative societies, it is perceived as normal in the community:

There is a lot of domestic violence in the Roma community. Men very often torture their wives. But this is perceived normal in the community. They have done it before, the grandmothers have endured this, the mothers have endured this, and the young wives will endure this. For example, they can talk to the neighbour, in the neighbourhood, so that everyone knows about who has ever beaten his wife and this is considered normal. While in other communities there is also violence. There is violence among richer people, among the more educated, among Turks and Bulgarians and other communities. Men are also jealous of their wives, torturing them, mentally and physically. But there they know this is not normal. Women do not share it, they remain silent. They are ashamed. Yet education and intellect tell them that this is not good. (M., 31 years old, village, Horohane Roma)

Nevertheless what the perception of violence is all women agree that violence affects women and children. Some of them justify the lack of reaction to violence with the benefit of children; other find it as reason and stimuli to react to that. Usually the two positions are at the two ends of the transformation of the attitude to domestic violence. Several of the respondents have walked this path from one to the other end and have clearly illustrated it.

The most common reason pointed by the respondent for men to become aggressors, apart from the so-called “traditional” reasons is alcohol.

“On several occasions, since my husband is used to drinking, when he is drunk he jumps and starts shouting “Come on, let's fight”. (D., 67 years old, small town, Horohane Roma)

"I have often seen domestic violence in families where the man drinks". (G., 45 years old, small town, Dasikane Roma, Musician Roma)

"What are the major difficulties a woman who is victim of domestic violence faces?"

"Pain, fear from losing the children if she has any, shame not to be left alone." (R., 27 years old, small town, Dasikane Roma, Musician Roma)

5.2 The range of domestic violence commonly occurring in Roma families

There is a general opinion shared by the respondents about the large range of domestic violence in the Roma community. One of the women questioned pointed that "every second woman in the community is victim of violence". This opinion is shared by all categories of respondents, no matter whether they identify violence as a problem or not. However, the next two most popular words coming after this statement are **silence** and **fear**.

"Women, victims of violence live in silence. Sometimes, even their relatives are not aware of the situation". (E, 30 years old, small town, Burgudjii Roma)

"Do women look for a way to get out of this situation or they continue to live in it?"

I think some do, but they can not find a way. The Fear. She decides something until he enters the room and she forgets. Fear is the main difficulty. If you get over fear once, you will find a way, things will happen, but it is that such women do not dare. Or the children - looking at the children and "but no, I will tolerate more" because of the children. If this happens, you should not say you do it for the children, because the children grow up in such an environment, their soul, everything becomes unbalanced, and when the children grow up, at some point they leave, and you have to sit, because the years are already there. You have nowhere to go when you are 50. Maybe when children grow up in such an environment, one day they become the same. I do not know.

(T., 35 years old, village, Rudari)

The majority of the women agree that domestic violence is a taboo topic, an issue which is not spoken about for various reasons: because it is supposed to stay in the family, because the traditions say so, because this is part of women's life, because of shame, because of lack of support, because it is my fault, because my mother and grandmother have done so.

Some of the women who belong to one of the most conservative groups of the Roma community (the Kaldarashi Roma) have shared during the interviews that the husband should be nice and kind to his wife and should never beat her ... *"unless she has not deserved it."* (Y., 72 years old, village, Kaldarashi Roma) But she usually deserves it. In these cases she has to be punished. And this happens in many families. Young girls and women has been taught this since they were born so even after it happens they keep blaming themselves and keep silent.

“My husband used to have many lovers. Everybody knew it, it was a public secret. But I had to stay at home and bear everything. I had to be patient when he was coming home in the evening after leaving his lover, I had to be patient when he got drunk and started shouting and insulting me. I had to do everything he wanted and could not do anything I wanted. Because I am a woman.”

(M., 52 years old, village, Kaldarashi Roma)

Many of the respondents share the opinion that domestic violence is more common in Roma community not because of Roma culture but because in some conservative groups of the community traditional patriarchal practices are still preserved from one side, and from another, because due to the conservative attitude to women they are less informed, have low awareness and less support and instruments to react.

In my opinion domestic violence is much more spread among minorities and people of Roma origin. Because they are not well aware of their rights. And often women, because of their low education, cannot distinguish what is right and what is wrong. They grow up with a different value system. For them, no matter how much her husband beats her, she has to be patient because of her children. At least that's what I've seen in the community. There are certainly some cases among the Bulgarians as well, but I think it will be less. (S., 40 years old, city, Horohane Roma)

The respondents agree that domestic violence refers both to women and children. The majority agree that it mostly affects women. However, few of the women point out that it also refers to men, although these are rather exceptional cases.

Several of the women related domestic violence with the phenomenon of early or forced marriages. They do not speak only about early marriages as domestic violence, but state that in the cases when the age of the bride was 14 – 15 the relations between the spouses have later transformed into situations of domestic violence.

In our community, girls get married very early. For example, she goes for a walk somewhere. It happens that she meets a teenager, they put joint in the cigarette, she smokes, they rape her, she gets pregnant. They force her marry this man so that honesty and virginity don't tarnish the family? And she has to live with this person all her life because she soon gets pregnant. Neighbours, relatives press her in order not to expose the family that she had slept with somebody before the wedding, that she lost her virginity, to stay with this man to live. Women feel unwanted, unloved, disliked. They stay and suffer because of their children. And so they live with this harassment. (M, 31 years old, village, Horohane Roma)

Since I got married when I was 15, my occupation was to clean and cook, home work. When we sat down to make a decision, he did not consult me, because I looked stupid to him and I could not give wise advice. Who am I to give him advice? To ask how much money is left? My task was to cook, clean and look after children. When the holidays came, I did not receive any gifts, no flowers. When my birthday came, I received a slap as a gift. He never told me "you are beautiful, I love you". Never. Every woman wants her husband to tell her that she is beautiful, something to make her happy. I felt like a slave. I didn't feel like a real woman. (M, 31 years old, village, Horohane Roma).

5.3 The level of knowledge Roma women possess in regards to domestic violence, their rights, and how to seek help for themselves

On the basis of the interviews we may conclude that the understanding of Roma women about domestic violence has risen during recent years. As pointed above none of the women interviewed during the survey completely reject the existence of domestic violence. They all agree it exists; they differ in their opinion about the scope of it and about the reasons for it. Very few of the women declare that they do not consider it a crime. Most of the women perceive it as violation of human rights and agree with the need to react. In this respect, we can mark a significant change in attitudes during the last months, especially after the beginning of the COVID pandemic. One of the reasons for it is that during the emergency state and after it, the level of public discussions on domestic violence has raised in macro society. This is due to the fact that during the pandemic the cases of victims of domestic violence (even death cases) have increased. As a result the sensitivity in majority society about the issue has risen.

It can be said that in many cases of domestic violence, victims feel alone and isolated and do not have access to information or support services. Nowadays, however, people are more aware of domestic violence and this is more visible in the news, television programs, etc. (R, 27 years old, small town, Roma Musicians)

Inevitably this has been reflected in the Roma community. However, the fact that many women from the respondents confess about domestic violence, does not necessary mean that this leads to real actions. Just the opposite: there are still a prevailing number of women who have not and would not take any actions. Nevertheless, it is already an important step: domestic violence is already considered wrong. This takes the issue to a higher stage where the focus would be to overcome all the barriers that prevent women from real actions since already the knowledge and awareness about the problem exists.

Do you think domestic violence is a crime and why?

Yes, because it violates my human rights. Second, because it kills everything in me. Maybe because it closes the door for my future development, because after such violence I would close in myself. As I have experienced it. (G., 25 years old, small town, Burgudjii Roma)

On the basis of the interviews we may say that although the women already know that domestic violence is something bad, many of them still do not know they rights or do not know how to react.

Many of the women do not know their rights. They think that the woman is subordinated to the man and they should obey. They do not know that no body has the right to torture them, to do harm. No body tells them this. No institutions helps. (M, 38 years old, village, Rudari)

Most important is, as several of the respondents have outlined, that the majority of the victims do not have the self-confidence to react and to stand for their rights. They do not even know that it is possible to react.

If she is a successful woman, she may do it, but if you are dependent on your husband and have no relatives ... they suffer a lot ... (D, 35 years old, village, Rudari)

When you do not know about something, there is no way to strive for it. It is like eating chocolate. If you have not eaten chocolate ever in your life, you would not know you like and would not know you want it. The same is with all the women who have not seen a different attitude from men to women, all their life they've been told to obey because this is the way things happen in the family. So even if they have already started to understand that something is wrong, they still have not accumulated enough understanding that they should react.

At the same time, the second category of women, who have already understood they should react on the forms of violence and shouldn't bear it. Do not know how to do it. One of the specifics of the Roma community is that

a person is important as part of the community; he or she exists within the community, following community norms. The table below presents the relations and dynamic of relationships in Roma community and in the majority modern community. These relations are important to understand the model of behaviour of Roma victims to domestic violence. For a person belonging to a traditional community leaving outside of the community is equal to social death. He or she would not be aware of the relations in the society, have no person to rely on and is very hard to survive. It is not impossible but this person

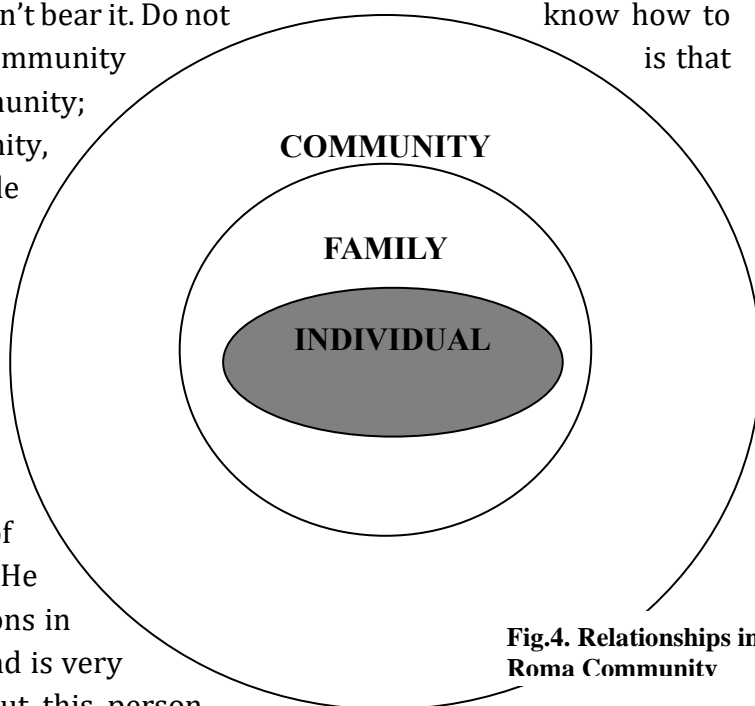


Fig.4. Relationships in the Roma Community

needs 1) to be very strong and confident in herself (the problem is harder for women) or 2) find support mechanisms which are lacking at the moment, as we will see in the next section. So in order to react a woman who is a victim of violence from her husband/ partner rise against all the taboos, concepts, stereotypes and prejudices in the community which say that these issues should stay within the family. If she does it she would be (most probably) punished by the community and expelled from it. Or at least it used to be the model and many women think this still is. So if you are a woman, if you have no education, no financial incomes, no profession or occupation and you are deprived of the support mechanisms of the community, you are

practically doomed. Or you have to be very strong and self-confident to survive which brings us back to the statement, that a woman can break this vicious cycle only if she has enough self-confidence. Most of the women in the Roma community don't have it.

"And there seems to be no change. These women continue to suffer, until at some point they get used to being beaten, they just get used to beating and these insults, they do not accept it as violence, for them it is everyday issue. It can be said that in many cases of domestic violence, victims feel alone and isolated and do not have access to information or support services." (M, 34 years old, city, Kaldarashi)

Especially this applies if the woman has children, even further, if these children are boys. One of the respondents from a very traditional Roma group has shared about her experience *"After stabbing me with a knife, I ran away from home. However, my boy, who was then 2 years old, stayed*

with them. They wouldn't let me see or approach him. They told me, "You don't have a child anymore." I decided to file a custody case. Then my mother told me, "Stop these things, don't let the people talk about us. Go back to him, and I'll talk to him so he doesn't beat you so badly." (T, 28 years old, city, Burgudjii)

So as we see, the children are another factor (although they have been one of the basic factor for not reacting to violence by women not just in the Roma, but in all communities) who make it harder to break the vicious circle and react to the status quo.

The mechanisms explained above are supported by statements of almost all respondents

"I know, I have heard of such women. They have shared, but in spite of everything they are patient because of their children, because of their family and they are waiting for some kind of change." (V, 24 years old, city, Dasikane Roma)

Recently, with the flow of information flooding us from everywhere, the awareness of the women has raised. Many of them share that "they have heard that they can react, that there are centers that are there to help". For some of them this is still abstract information but the important is that it is there. They might not use it at the moment; they might not know how to use it in the moment, but it is already there in their minds challenging them from inside that a

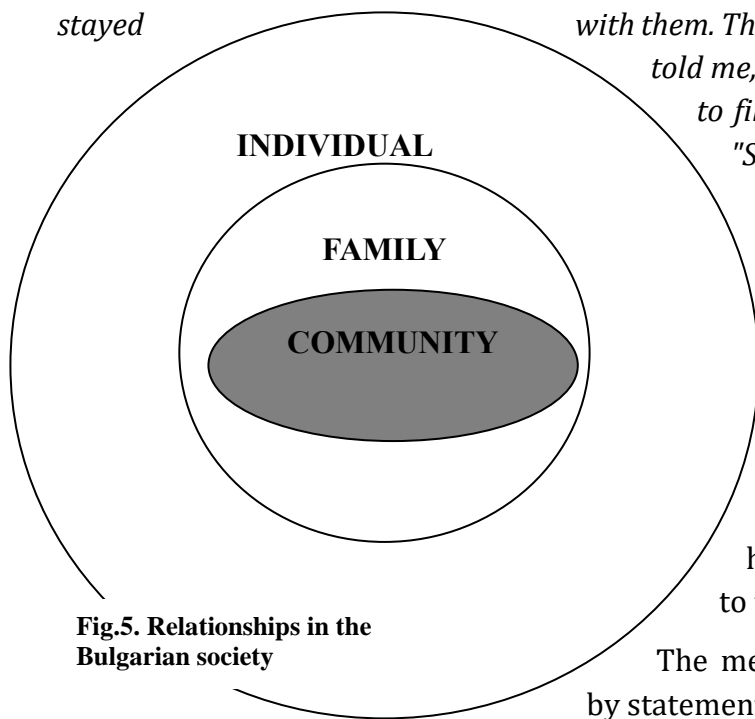


Fig.5. Relationships in the Bulgarian society

change is possible. And at one point when their patience is over, they would take it out of the drawer and would use it.

The aching problem now is how to reach the women who do not have access to this flow of information (they are not allowed to have access to social media, to have phones or the television they watch is censored).

5.4 The experiences of Roma women in accessing or not accessing, support services

We have to distinguish between the awareness and knowledge about the institutions that are supposed to help in these cases, and the real actions or attitudes towards these institutions. The awareness in the community is already available, more or less. It is higher in the communities which are more modernised, which have more intensive contacts with the macro-society: most of the women work, they have at least secondary education, use social networks, etc.

The first place she can go is the police, she can go to the GP for medical attention. I had recently heard of crisis centers where women could go. There has been more talk lately about this, yes. It's as if I hear it more often. (I, 49 years old, village, Horohane Roma)

At the same time, the knowledge about the institutions does not help but rather deepen the disappointment from them. None of the women interviewed has shared positive experience with institutions. In the community there is vague consent that the police or any other institution should be approached and could help. The few women who had decided to call the police shared negative experience. In general, the institutions have very low credit of confidence.

In general, people do not believe police. They would rather ask friend or relatives for help instead. (G., 25 years old, small town, Burgudjii)

In the small places, where everyone knows everybody, women are afraid that when they go to the police the information would immediately spread around. In most of the cases, the police react on the moment, come to the house, warn the husband and leaves. And the problems continue even bigger for the woman.

Women do nothing, they are silent. Because if they complain in such institutions, then they will go back to their husband; he will beat her again, the institutions wouldn't do anything and she would only have more problems. So they are silent. (Y, 37 years old, village, Burgudjii)

Sometimes it is even worse. One of the women has shared that her husband was a friend with the police boss and she never dared to submit a complain to the police. Another woman shared

that she had gathered courage and went to the police. However, they turned her down with the words “This is your Roma stuff. You deal with it – do not bother us“. And she never did it again.

On the other hand, if there is someone they trust they have more courage to react. This supporter can be a community mediator or a non-governmental organisation that works on the field and that they trust. It seems from the interviews, that women who are victims of domestic violence need somebody to protect them not just from the perpetrator but from the institutions as well. Another negative emotion they have been through approaching the institutions is that often servants from institutions make Roma women feel guilty for what has happened and victimise the victims.

They told me it is our Roma stuff and in our community men have their rights (T, 29 years old, city, Burgudjii)

The figure of the community mediator, educational, health mediator appears to be a beam of hope in the community. This is a person that is from the community, a person who has high credentials from Roma women. Furthermore, the mediator has all the characteristics that lack the ordinary women – she (usually women) is usually with education, high self-esteem, connections with the institutions. So in them the victim sees all that she is missing. Therefore, it is strategically to invest in the figure of the Roma mediator and provide her/him with knowledge regarding domestic violence: forms of domestic violence, mechanisms to react, institutions that are responsible, and so on. Recently a number of projects has been realised in this direction and this is probably reflected in the results.¹⁹

I think the mediators could be very helpful. Especially if they are people respected by the community, something like leaders whom people trust. (E., 30 years old, small town, Burgudjii)

The other big institution that has been outlined during the interviews as one of the supporters is the Protestant church or rather the different denominations of the Protestant churches. A number of women who have been through heavy forms of violence have pointed that the Protestant church they visit has given them strength to overcome this and courage to react. It closely correlates with what we have written above about having a support community and somebody to stand behind you. Although some of the Roma women have pointed the miraculous power of God who have saved them or changed their husbands for good, it is rather the strength and courage that a community gives you in times of hardship. And one refers again

¹⁹ The Council of Europe project Justrom continues already for several years. It is focusing on Roma women rights and domestic violence is one of the topics that are covered. Since the beginning of the COVID crisis, Center Amalipe has also organised several online trainings for the educational mediators we work with (around 60 mediators) specifically on the topic of domestic violence and how to help, especially in the time of crisis.

to fig.4 s/he can see again applied the community model and channels of changing attitudes that a Roma woman (and even man) would recognise and accept. The person needs this safety to know that if a step is done, yes, this might lead to being expelled from your community, but at the same time there is another alternative community that would welcome and support you so that you are not left alone.

Yes. It happened so that at one point her husband went to jail for something small, something with a driver's license or driving. And just then she sought comfort in God and began to go to church and pray. At this point in prison, her husband met someone who also started talking to him about God. And so it happened that he was released from prison only a week later. During this period he began to believe in God, and my sister became quite religious. And I can say that changed everything. As far as I know, he didn't touch her after that. We truly believe that the Lord has helped them. (E., 30 years old, small town, Burgudjii)

Ten times I have been splitting with him and ten times I have been giving him new chances. The second way was that I became a Christian. I started attending an evangelical church. They gave me a bible. This bible changed my life. There was a Christian around me who, for the first time in my life, would turn to me and say "You are very beautiful." Before that I used to feel ugly, inferior, rejected by my family and my husband. But someone tells you "You're very beautiful." I went home, looked at the mirror, and said to myself "I'm beautiful, I'm beautiful." From then on, my life literally changed. I said to myself, "Yes, I am a woman, I have rights like other women." I started to have a lot of dreams to study, to get an education. When I told my husband I was a devout Christian, I wanted to study, he beat me and kicked me out, I was rejected by my family, my children, and him. When you decide to change your life for yourself, some people need to help you get back on your feet and move on. I didn't know the word "I love you," I didn't know "you're beautiful, you're precious, you're unique." I have never heard those words before. (M., 31 years old, village, Horohane Roma)

5.5 The skills Roma women may lack in order to claim their rights

As it has already been discussed on several occasions above, there are several reasons for Roma women not to claim their rights. We could hardly call all them skills but rather factors. If we have to summarise, we can point the following:

- Lack of self-confidence
- Lack of self-esteem
- Lack of knowledge about their rights
- Lack of skills to identify violence
- Fear
- Lack of support from the community
- Lack of support from the family
- Lack of support from the institutions
- Gilt
- False understanding about the subordinated role of women
- False understanding of traditions

It would probably be more interesting to see how the respondents see the skill they need in order to claim their rights. Although expressed in different way the Roma women who took part in the research have united around the statement that the most important skill to react and oppose to domestic violence for a woman is her internal strength. A woman would have internal strength to take a step against the tradition (in some communities) and the community itself (sometimes) if she has enough self-confidence and self-esteem. Very rarely she could achieve this if she was alone. In order to believe in herself she needs somebody to support her: a friend, a mediator, an alternative community

Will. Will and desire in yourself. Strength that she could cross barriers. She could break that fear. She could say "Stop the violence," she could say "Stop, I'm a woman, I have rights." She could. As long as she wants, as long as she wishes. As long as she has support, someone to help her. She might say, "Yes, I will help myself," but somehow there must be support next to her, people to help her get back on her feet in the beginning and make sure she can. (M., 31 years old, village, Horohane Roma)

6. Conclusions

Domestic violence in the Roma community is still a topic covered by many taboos, stereotypes and myths. It is a multilayer issue that is still poisoning the life of many Roma women. As many of the harmful traditional practices, it is not a Roma tradition but seriously affects the Roma community and especially Roma women.

The concept for domestic violence in the Roma community is strongly related to community understanding of gender roles and the dominant role of men. Women are still perceived as the “weak” sex and the range of DV covers more than half of the women in the community. However, the perception of DV has many colours and nuances: from justifying it by victimising the women to a total outraged reaction.

At the same time we can divide women into three categories: those who reject the existence of violence or justify it ; second, women who realise how destructive and dangerous violence is but still cannot find enough strength or reason to face it and stop it; and third, women, who have found the strength to openly reject all forms of violence and are ready to react no matter of the consequences. The factor that defines into what category a Roma woman belongs is the level of self-confidence she has and the stage she is determined at to change the status quo.

A lot of Roma women suffer from domestic violence but they often keep silence because it is widely spread that these are internal family issues that should stay within the household; this is woman’s fault and she has provoked her husband to punish her. At the same time most of the women have clearly shown that they do not agree with violence but they either do not know how to react or do not have the strength to do it (or both).

Further, the research has shown very low credit of Roma women to institutions responsible to deal with domestic violence but at the same time high level of trust in the Protestant churches and especially in the community mediator.

The community mediator (either educational, or health, or social) is the figure that could be the catalyst who could quicker bring the change. Usually, the mediator is a female who has enough knowledge on the issue, who have self-confidence to approach the responsible institutions and strength to react and even oppose community norms. I.e. she is all that a victim of violence has not dared to be; she is the example and even a role model that could make a woman react and find the strength for change in herself in turn.

The last one year, after the beginning of the COVID pandemic, has played the role of a catalyst. The raise of sensitivity towards this problem in macro society affected also the state of the issue in the Roma community. This year has revealed the problem of domestic violence and its scale in the Roma community. However, apart from this, the survey has shown the big potential in the Roma community. It has further shown that the processes of change have

already started since already there is enough of energy accumulated. The problem of domestic violence looks like a frozen lake. Once you throw a stone into the ice, you make a crack which very quickly covers the whole frozen surface. And soon the ice is broken. Once you start talking about domestic violence and throw the first stone, very quickly, the frozen surface of taboos and prejudices will crack. So we need to keep talking about need but we also need the stones that bring the change.

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