

PROBLEMS FACED BY ROMA IN TURKEY REGARDING ACCESS TO FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS¹

A) About the Roma

The Roma are one of the largest of the disadvantaged groups living in Turkey. Since Turkey does not collect data on ethnicity, there is no precise data on the population of Roma living in the country. However, it is estimated that there are over two million Roma living in Turkey.²

Turkey is the only country that is home to communities of the three main Roma groups—Roma, Dom and Lom. Although these groups share some similarities in terms of lifestyle, they also have numerous differences. Roma live in the west of Turkey, i.e. in the Marmara and Aegean regions; Loms live in the north of the country, i.e. in the Black Sea Region; and Doms live in the regions of Eastern Anatolia and South-Eastern Anatolia. While not belonging to these three main Roma (Gypsy) groups, the Abdals are another group living in Turkey referred to by the general public as Gypsies. Abdals mainly live in the region of Central Anatolia. These groups are known by different names in the regions they live in, particularly in reference to their traditional occupations: *Elekçi* (Sieve-Maker), *Sepetçi* (Basket-Weaver), *Kalaycı* (Tinsmith), *Demirci* (Ironmonger), *Arabacı* (Carter) etc. Furthermore, names such as *Poşa* are used to refer to Loms; *Mitrip* or *Karaçi* to refer to Doms; and *Aşiret* or *Beyoğlu* to refer to Abdals.

B) Basic Problems Faced by Roma Living in Turkey – Rights Violations

In general, the different Roma groups living in Turkey face similar problems. The most serious problems faced by these groups are related to access to employment, education, shelter and health services. Roma face problems enjoying even the most fundamental civil rights. The extreme poverty faced by the majority of Roma living in Turkey is one of the main obstacles to the social, cultural, economic and political participation of these groups as equal and free citizens, and the main cause of this poverty is the discrimination they face. Exclusion and discrimination in terms of access to employment, education, shelter and health services create a significant obstacle for these groups. The perception of the Roma in the media replicates and reinforces the

¹ This fact sheet was prepared by Minority Rights Group International (MRG) and the Zero Discrimination Association (SAD) as part of the project “Mobilising Civil Society for Monitoring Equality for Roma People in the Education and Housing Systems in Turkey”, which was run with financial support from the European Union.

² A 2009 report by Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, estimated the population of Roma in Turkey at 2 750 000.

<https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?p=&id=1511197&direct=true>

existing discrimination.

a) The Right to Education

The fundamental problems faced by Roma in the field of education include the fact that some Roma children are not registered in the education system, low attendance rates, poor school performance, and early dropouts.

- The schooling rate for pre-school education among Roma children is extremely low.
- School dropouts are very common, particularly among children aged 12-15. Many Roma children do not even complete compulsory education.
- Not only do a very low number of Roma children complete secondary education and then go on to pursue higher education or university education, but those students who do continue their education often choose to hide their identity due to fear of discrimination.
- Roma citizens do not benefit from vocational training or adult education to a sufficient extent.
- While the participation rate of Roma children in formal education is low, there exists a practice of traditional education handed down from parents to children starting from a very young age, particularly among Roma groups who are practising musicians.
- Studies in the field have produced two important findings. The first is that the main obstacles to Roma accessing the right to education are poverty, followed by discrimination. The second is that the issue of access to education exacerbates problems faced by Roma in other areas.
- The problems faced by Roma citizens in the field of employment are directly affected by problems in access to education. Roma parents who work in low-paid, irregular jobs are unable to pay the costs of their children's education.
- Living in poverty leads some Roma families to send their children to work as part of their survival strategy. According to studies in the field, Roma children are obliged to work in order to contribute to the family budget, and this obligation leads many children to abandon their schooling.
- Seasonal agricultural work, a common source of income for a significant number of Roma citizens, means that many families take part in seasonal migration. As a result of this, many Roma children are unable to attend school for a number of months of each year.
- Studies show that the marginalisation of Roma children in the school environment accelerates their disengagement from school.
- In classes or schools where there is a majority of Roma children, the parents of non-Roma pupils or educational staff often decide to remove non-Roma pupils from the class or school in question, leading to the creation of segregated classes or schools

that contain only Roma children. This situation has a negative effect of the quality of education in the schools in question. This educational segregation is a problem that exists in practice, but is not part of the legal regulations of Turkey's education system. Discriminatory practices in the education system lead some Roma children to choose to hide their ethnic identity; discriminatory practises can result in some children becoming disillusioned with school and/or dropping out of school entirely.

- As a result of the urban renewal projects carried out in recent years, the homes of many Roma citizens have been demolished and families displaced from their homes. Turkey's address-based registration system makes it obligatory to have a permanent residential address in order to access any public service. As such, Roma citizens who have been displaced from their homes and have no fixed address state that they face problems when registering with educational institutions.
- A significant majority of Roma citizens face problems related to accommodation, and these problems have a negative effect on the educational performance of Roma children.
- Interconnected socio-cultural and economic factors in the lives of Roma have a negative effect on their access to education. Early marriage is widely practised in Roma communities; this is partly influenced by tradition, but also forms part of the family's survival strategy. Among the Roma community, the average age of marriage is 15-16, corresponding to a child's secondary- or high-school years. While various studies present early marriage as one of the factors in children's disengagement from school, other research has found that by the time Roma children reach the age of marriage many have already left school and entered working life.
- Roma families' attitude towards education, as well as the social environment in which Roma children spend their formative years, are seen as significant factors in determining the quality of the connection that Roma children form with education. Problems experienced with regards to raising children arise as a natural result of widespread early parenthood. Studies show that Roma families with a low educational level do not have the sufficient knowledge or intellectual background to support and guide their children in their schoolwork. The idea of building a future through education is not convincing for children who do not have successful examples of schooling or role models in their family or social circles.
- Although the Roma form part of the country's cultural diversity, no space is given in the curriculum to Roma culture. There remains a very long way to go before syllabuses present Roma culture and experiences in a way that is free of stereotyped judgements and prejudices.
- The number and quality of personnel employed in schools in areas with a high Roma population is insufficient. The low number of permanent teachers, and high number of substitute teachers, combined with the frequent reassignment of teachers to different schools creates a problem of trust for students and negatively impacts the effectiveness of education. Teachers working with Roma students are not aware of

the socio-economic and cultural conditions of Roma groups or of the disadvantaged position in which they live. As a result, since they are unaware of the specific situation of Roma children, teachers are unable to play an effective role in ensuring the children's successful integration in society.

- Research has shown that the poor physical condition of schools in Roma neighbourhoods negatively affects the level of education. Members of the Roma community frequently state that the physical structure and equipment of schools does not meet the children's educational needs.
- The fact that there are no social activity centres or after-school education programmes in Roma neighbourhoods to support children's extra-curricular education is a problem that requires an immediate solution.

b) Employment

With the disappearance of their traditional occupations (e.g. basket-weaving, sieve making, tinsmithing), the Roma have turned to casual work of the kind not particularly favoured by other segments of society. The most common of these are scrap dealing, waste paper collection, heavy lifting, seasonal agricultural work and cleaning. Roma who work in these occupations have no regular income or social security, which also prevents them from enjoying other rights. While child labour is common among the Roma, a higher number of problems regarding employment are faced by elderly and disabled Roma, as well as by women.

- Research shows that unemployment is the biggest problem for Roma living in different areas of Turkey. Although it is known that the level of unemployment among Roma is very high, since data disaggregated by ethnicity is not collected in Turkey there are no official statistics on unemployment levels among Roma.
- The majority of Roma who do work, work in informal, temporary or part time employment, in low-paid jobs involving manual labour. Roma rarely work in regular jobs that can be covered by social security. The majority work under harsh working conditions where health and safety standards are ignored. It is reported that workplace accidents are common and that the harsh working conditions lead to chronic occupational diseases.
- The low education level of Roma, combined with their lack of marketable skills creates a significant obstacle to members of the Roma community regarding access to regular employment. Due to developments in technology and industrialisation, demand for the traditional crafts produced by the Roma has fallen, and traditional occupations have, for the most part, ceased to be a source of income for them. Furthermore, since Roma do not meet the conditions deemed compulsory to attend vocational training courses for adults, they are unable to benefit from such programmes.
- Prejudice and discrimination are among the main obstacles to Roma having access to

regular employment. Roma are stigmatised on the basis of the neighbourhood they live in, and many Roma citizens feel the need to hide their ethnic identity to avoid discrimination in the workplace or losing their jobs. It has been observed that giving an address in a Roma neighbourhood in a job application is a cause for the application being unsuccessful.

c) The Right to Housing

- Research shows that Roma communities live in substandard housing in crowded neighbourhoods with poor infrastructure. The majority of Roma live in deedless *gecekondus*³ accommodation, while others live in makeshift shelters or tents. Many of these places lack adequate infrastructure or amenities, such as clean water, electricity, sewage system, safe roads and transportation. One of the biggest problems for Roma in terms of enjoying the right to housing is the fact that they have no legal guarantee of tenancy or ownership for the buildings in which they live.
- In general, the majority of Roma live in segregated neighbourhoods that they have established themselves. However, spatial segregation is not the product of a systematic state policy.
- Living in a *gecekondus* is seen as a survival strategy for the Roma. The *gecekondus* is seen by many as a space that meets both their need for shelter and the various requirements of their working life. For many Roma who work in low-paid jobs or with no regular income, living in a *gecekondus* means avoiding the burden on the family budget that comes from living in rented accommodation. The *gecekondus* also fulfils important functions in the working life of Roma who work in jobs such as waste collection or driving a horse cart. For Roma who work as waste collectors, the *gecekondus* serves as a temporary storage where they sort and keep the waste before sending it to recycling factories. For those who work as horse cart drivers, outbuildings added on to the *gecekondus* are used as stables to house and care for their animals.

Therefore for many Roma, living in poor, segregated neighbourhoods that are excluded from the rest of society is a necessity imposed by circumstances, or in other words is part of their survival strategy. However, studies also show that these neighbourhoods do not offer their inhabitants a completely safe environment. The general public equates Roma neighbourhoods with crime, and sees these areas as a threat to the security of the city; Roma are therefore stigmatised on the basis of the neighbourhood in which they live. This 'neighbourhood stigma' has a negative effect on their access to employment, education and health services.

- Research shows that Roma face discrimination when renting property.
- The urban renewal projects that have been carried out over recent years in various

³ A *gecekondus* (literally 'placed overnight') is a house built quickly and without the correct permissions; their residents are squatters with no deeds to the property or legal right to live there.

parts of Turkey have included many neighbourhoods with a high Roma population. These projects were carried out without taking into account the socio-economic situation of the Roma, and have thus had a devastating effect on the Roma community's right to shelter and have exacerbated their social exclusion.

d) Access to Health Services

- Studies carried out in recent years show that compared to the other areas in which they face significant problems, the Roma are in a better position when it comes to access to health services. To a large extent, healthcare organisations do cover the areas populated by Roma communities.
- Research shows that the *Yeşil Kart* (Green Card) system providing free-of-charge access to health services is the most commonly used and well-received service facilitator among the Roma.
- However, various studies also state that society's stereotypes and discrimination against the Roma form an obstacle to Roma individuals regarding equal access to health services. One of the issues highlighted in these studies is that when Roma go to doctor's surgeries or hospitals for treatment they are made to wait by health staff, are not given enough attention, or are sometimes turned away.
- Research shows that Roma's sub-standard living conditions have a negative effect on their health.
- The harsh working conditions of Roma citizens who work mostly in low-paid, unskilled, unsafe and precarious jobs are seen to cause chronic diseases.
- It has also been found that substance addiction poses a threat to the health of Roma children and adolescents.

e) Access to Social Welfare

Research in the field does not present enough information regarding the access of Roma to social welfare. Research tends to focus on four main problem areas—employment, shelter, health and education—and neglects the issue of social welfare.

However, when we take into account the fact that the majority of Roma work in irregular and precarious jobs or are unemployed, it is clear that access to social welfare plays an important part in their livelihood.

- The main social welfare categories to which Roma have access are the following: the conditional money transfers and aid in kind offered by the Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation; the homecare allowance and needs allowance offered by the Social Services and Child Protection Agency; the disability allowance paid by the Social Security Institution; and services provided by municipalities.
- The social services provided by public institutions have been criticised for being

unsystematic, and for the existence of arbitrary practices regarding citizens' access to these services. Factors such as the sect/religion to which they belong or the political party for which they vote have in some places been found to lead to negative experiences in Roma citizens' access to social welfare.

- Furthermore, the lack of knowledge among Roma about the social welfare available, together with the complicated bureaucracy and/or cost of the application processes for certain services can impede access to social welfare.

MINORITY RIGHTS GROUP INTERNATIONAL

Minority Rights Group International is a non-governmental organization working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples worldwide, and to promote cooperation and understanding between communities. Our activities are focused on international advocacy, training, publishing and outreach. We are guided by the needs expressed by our worldwide partner network of organizations, which represent minority and indigenous peoples.

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ZERO DISCRIMINATION ASSOCIATION

The Zero Discrimination Association (*Sıfır Ayrımcılık Derneği*) was founded in Istanbul in 2009 by a group of activists with the aim of working to prevent rights violations and discrimination against all disadvantaged groups, particularly against Roma and communities following a Roma lifestyle.

The aim of the association is to support the social development of economically, socially and culturally at-risk and disadvantaged communities and to carry out projects within a framework of dialogue and solidarity that tackle prejudice and discrimination against these communities and promote social unity.

The association

- Prepares reports on the problems faced by Roma, which are then used to lobby the government for solutions, and holds meetings on these issues with public

- institutions on a local or national level.
- Runs various advocacy activities and campaigns in order to raise public awareness about the problems faced by Roma.
 - Provides consultancy on various issues to Roma associations throughout the country.
 - Offers support to Roma associations for institutional capacity building.

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